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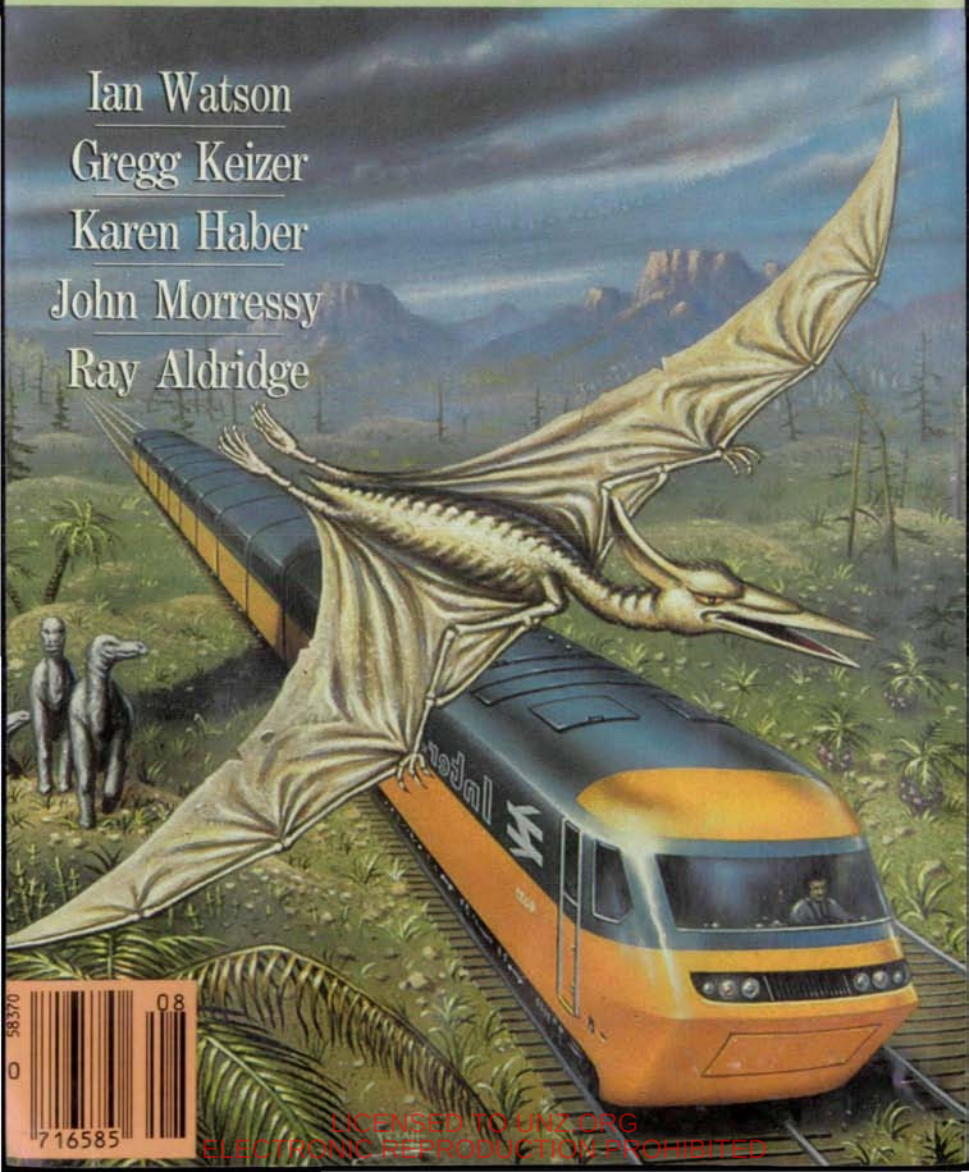

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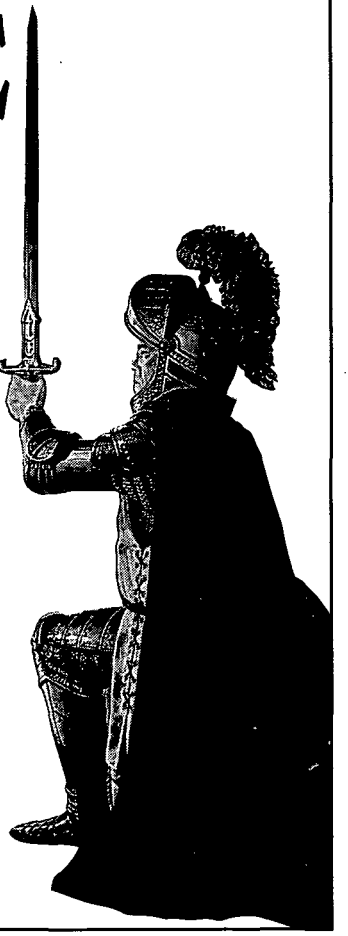

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Assistant Editors: SUSAN FOX, DAVID MICHAEL BUSKUS, ROBIN O'CONNOR

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After a couple of excursions into darkest fantasy ("The Mole Field," December 1988; "Salvage Rites," January 1987), Ian Watson returns with science fiction of the highest order, about a train trip that begins in London and ends . . .

IN THE UPPER CRETACEOUS WITH THE SUMMERFIRE BRIGADE

By Ian Watson

RAIN DRENCHED ENGland's second city. The forecast was a wet one for the whole southern half of the country. What would the weather be like in the Upper Cretaceous era? I hardly cared. Sue's farewell to me after toast and coffee had been lukewarm. I hadn't told her the whole grim truth about our finances. She viewed this trip to my publisher as a frivolity, a piece of self-indulgence, and a humiliation. Juliette had badgered me yet again. Why couldn't she go on the school trip to Italy this summer?

"To see all the Leonardos and things, Dad."

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"Which particular ones?" I felt tempted to ask. Why couldn't Juliette content herself with a day trip to London by way of what amounted to the Garden of Eden? People quickly became blasé about the technological miracle. It was yesterday's doughnut; and yesterday's doughnut was stale — just like my *Springdew*, already out of print pending the "long-awaited" sequel.

On the platform at New Street Station, a brown-skinned girl with a Brummy accent asked me, "How long does the journey to London take?" She toted a heavy-looking holdall, which she didn't put down. Was she pure Pakistani, Bangladeshi? Or part white, fruit of a mixed marriage? Really, her accent said who she was. She was British, from Birmingham.

She was beautiful, with a trim figure, slim features within a mass of raven hair, wild, coaly eyes. She wore jeans and a green anorak. Since she seemed to be testing my attitude, I made sure I smiled.

"Eighty million years. Of course, the timetable says eighty minutes."

"So much time! All the time in the world."

She was seventeen or so. Just starting out; so long as the British Government didn't send her "back" to some ghastly, fly-blown village she had never seen in her life, by the Indus or the Brahmaputra. Surely they would never do that.

She glanced along the platform, where a couple of hundred other people were waiting, making eye contact with a bearded Asian youth dressed similarly to her. I noticed a score of young people from the subcontinent scattered up and down, with duffels and zippered bags. Nothing unusual. Still, they generally clustered together, didn't they? As the girl's hair swirled, I saw the vertical scar on the side of her cheek. The slash mark of a Stanley knife?

She regarded me again, and what did she see? While teaching at college, I had cut a dash: dapper, trimly bearded, given to bow ties, my thick chestnut hair receding in orderly rank back over a polished half-dome of scalp. A few of my girl students had quite fancied me. Now here was a secondhand, gone-to-seed, middle-aged fellow, balding and muffled in a beard — attired in loose, damp mackintosh; best tweed jacket; checked slacks; wet, scuffed suede shoes. I resembled a crooked antiques dealer. "I'm robbing myself, madam, but I'll give you a tenner for that teapot."

"You really mean 80 million years *twice*, don't you?" she said. "The train goes back in time, then it has to come forward."

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I nodded affably. Anything to distract me from journey's end.

"I hope we'll see a *Triceratops*," I told her, though I couldn't have cared less. "Everybody ought to see old Three-Horns. Almost the symbol of our city, hmm?" Our city; hers and mine.

She laughed. "You mean because of the Bull Ring sculpture?"

The mascot of Birmingham's old shopping center was a bull with lowered horns. Even after demolition and swanky high-tech redevelopment, the emblem was still on display. That bull bore a striking resemblance to an irate *Triceratops*. Triceratops was rhino-plus: seven meters long, weighing in at a ton per meter, its triple horns sweeping forward from a great frill of bone, its lizard tail a giant rudder. A couple of years ago, I watched film footage on TV shot from the Intercity train. I had little time for TV these days.

"Maybe this time we'll see a whole herd," I encouraged the girl.

"Maybe!" Her eyes gleamed. She harbored a fire within her. Why couldn't Juliette nurse a similar flame instead of whining selfishness? Probably my daughter's selfishness was a reflection of her father's self-involvement — a self-centeredness that arose of necessity, otherwise I would never have enough hours in which to finish *Summerfire*.

"Here it comes!" The Intercity train was pulling in, doors swinging open. Passengers from London jumped out: so many suits, so many black document cases, in such a hurry. The girl followed me into the same carriage and sat directly opposite by the window, blocking the rest of the seat with her bag. Testing my racial tolerance? Daring me to notice her scar? I was facing London; she was facing Birmingham.

"I'm called Anita," she confided.

"I'm Bernard."

"So what do you do in life, Bernard?" This seemed a deeper question: What had I done to help her and fellow Britons of Asian or Afro-Caribbean descent in their hour of stress? Why, I had written a novel to fire the imagination, to let readers escape into wonderful times.

"I'm an author. Bernard Kelly. I wrote a novel called *Springdew*." When Anita looked blank, I continued: "Oh, about Renaissance intrigue. Art, love, death, revolution. With a fantasy twist, with Neoplatonic magical elements out of Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino. . . ." No, she wasn't one of my bygone students; now wasn't the past.

"Revolution," she repeated.

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"I'm trying to write a sequel called *Summerfire*. That's one word—"

The train jolted into motion. Our carriage trundled through the dingy brick tunnel beneath Moor Street Ringway to emerge briefly into a deluge. Ten seconds later we went through the entry gate to the time tunnel, a boiling, compacted thundercloud sustained by the generator-arch spanning both railway tracks — through into sunlight and Cretaceous scenery bare of any trace of the human race. No urban megasprawl, no factories, car parks, canals, or waste dumps, no abandoned detritus of Victorian enterprise where gangs might roam.

Anita breathed in deeply as if she could smell the cubic miles of unpolluted air beyond the window glass and beyond the shimmery translucence of the Swanson field.

"All looks so pure, doesn't it, Anita?"

"Pure?" Her hackles rose. She stared hard at me, assessingly. Might her travel companion be alluding to racial purity? Whatever *that* meant, in this country of mongrels! Mongrels with white skins, to be sure. . . .

"The air must taste so sweet out there."

She grunted as though such a possibility hadn't occurred to a city girl. I decided that she had breathed in with relief. She'd been holding her breath prior to passing through the Swanson gate — safely as alway, routinely so. Why had she felt anxious? Was this her first such train trip? Yet she chose to sit with an Anglo stranger. . . .

Rather than beside one of "her own kind"? Why on earth should she know any of the other Asians on this train? My reaction to her, I decided, was patronizingly racialist: see what a tolerant, liberal chap I am.

To distract Anita and myself, I pointed. "Look, hadrosaurs!"

Cretaceous *landscape* wasn't too dissimilar to that of uptime Britain, except perhaps that there was so much of it; that everything was landscape. Flowering plants had already evolved, likewise familiar trees such as pine and oak and poplar. Also more exotic species: figs, magnolias, tulip trees. By a small lake, a herd of the tall, duck-billed dinosaurs were ripping at vegetation. Their helmet-crests jutted like absurd weather vanes. A few feathered birds fluttered about. Up aloft a solitary pterosaur cruised, a demon from medieval art. *Those* were the differences.

Businessmen glanced out, then buried themselves back in documents. To them a pterosaur was no more than a big bat. The hadrosaurs were a sort of lunatic cattle draped in green crocodile skin. Had it not been for

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Anita, I might also, plunged in melancholy, have disregarded those.

"They're extinct," I told her. "They failed, and they were replaced."

The train sang as it raced along the rails. The locomotive hauling us was a diesel. A power supply to feed the pantograph of an electric loco couldn't be pushed through the time gates. This glassy corridor, this hundred-mile-long soap bubble, was a function of the modest deployment of tuned power at both ends, which brought the Swanson tunnel into existence between its terminals. A *modest* injection of power; the Swanson effect was remarkably inexpensive to sustain. The driver could stay in radio contact with Birmingham and London; aerials poked through gates.

Our diesel was fitted with a smoke trap, filters, and a waste-gas compressor; otherwise the tunnel could soon have resembled the worst of Victorian smog towns. Exhaust from the engine couldn't puff away into prehistory because we were just out of phase with the Cretaceous. I wasn't exactly in the distant past, thought I could see it clear as could be. The past couldn't see me or the speeding train; its creatures remained oblivious.

In Swanson terms, "out of phase" meant that if a dinosaur crossed the tracks ahead of us, loco and carriages would zoom right through, and the saurian would lumber on its way, neither past nor present affected by the encounter. Imagine the evolutionary consequences if the roamings of the big lizards had been balked by implacable, invisible barriers scores of miles long networking the archaic countryside, penning species into great separate wildlife parks for however long we twentieth-century travelers continued to journey in this style! Enough to drive the big, stupid lizards, the almighty cretins, to extinction? No, Swanson tubes hadn't zapped the dinosaurs.

Long, thin tubes, minimum length thirty miles, Intercity length. And functioning only 80 million years ago, a resonance effect due to where the earth and the sun had been in space-time at that ier date. Only terminals and gates existed on the ground in the uptime. The former railway tracks had been converted to high-speed motorways, which of course weren't suitable for Swanson travel. Too many vehicles to fit with exhaust traps. Car drivers might swerve instinctively to avoid the phantom wildlife or might brake to gaup at a rampaging carnosaur, causing crashes and tailbacks.

Nor could the time tunnels be inflated into city-size bubbles in the

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Cretaceous. Homes and factories couldn't be shifted into the past. But rail travel the Swanson way did relieve some of the strain on Britain's overcrowded environment. Especially in the freight department. Any contribution had to help. I hadn't been paying too much attention to the activities of the forced-repatriation fascists, the firebombings of mosques and halal butcher shops, the rapes, the beatings-up. Recently I'd had other worries on my mind. But pressure was bringing the pot to a boil, a very ugly boil.

"Hey, cheer up. Every dog has its day." Anita's grin enchanted me, though there seemed to be a zany edge to it. "*Summerfire!* I like that name, Bernard. It grabs me."

"Thanks." In fact, I felt seriously out of phase myself.

ON THE night before this trip to London, I suffered another anxiety attack. Waking in bed beside comatose Sue, I felt my hands and legs twitch uncontrollably. Legs wanted to be on the move. Hands tried to do something, flapping like butterflies caught in a spider's web. Once again the *albatross* was to blame.

Springdew was my third novel, the brick, the breakthrough, written in between teaching classes about the Renaissance. In that first flush of hysteria three and a bit years earlier, I quit my job as a lecturer in art history. Unicorn Books gave me a contract and what seemed a fat advance for the as-yet-unwritten *Summerfire*. *Springdew* did well enough, yet never as well as hoped for. What a fool I was to forsake Giorgione and Botticelli for freedom, which so soon became a cage. *Summerfire* was still hanging round my neck as we sank into debt. Of course the sequel must needs be finished, unless I wished to repay the advance. With what? I was overcome with amnesia as to who all the characters were and exactly what events had happened. Periodically I forced myself to reread *Springdew* and the wretched printout to date, which wasted more time. Of Leonardo, it was said, "the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts." I experienced only the disgusts.

Twitch, twitch. Such hands did not write assured narrative. Time was floating by. Not enough was happening, except in the debit department, which was always busy and punctual. Unless I scribbled notes to myself to trip over on the stairs, I even forgot whatever I promised Sue or sixteen-year-old Juliette in the way of house maintenance or help with exam revision — because I didn't want to steal the time from myself. Nor could

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poor Sue go out to work. For the past eighteen months, she'd been suffering a crippling postviral fatigue, one of the new breed of illnesses.

I could see no way back to what I'd been — none. I was becoming a pinched, frantic person. How could such a one kindle the blaze of *Summerfire*? Why was I forgetting what it was supposed to be about? Because that book had become simply another duty, heavy as lead. Lying from four in the morning till six in a state of utter nervousness, shivering, I wondered how long till we Kellys were forced to sell our home.

As daylight filtered through the curtains, I watched our cat, Ben (short for Benvenuto), sprawled asleep on a chair. The ginger mog spent so much of every day in the land of Nod. Its luxurious laziness used to comfort me. Secure in its home and its world, Ben wasn't worried about a bean. Now the sight provoked panic. Why couldn't I borrow some of Ben's unused, wasted time? Time enough to finish *Summerfire* quickly but surely, while the demanding world stood still? So I lost sleep, and tired myself. In a few hours, I'd be traveling to London to beg time.

Really, I thought, it's the end of my life. What would the exact mechanism be? An overdose of barbiturates toward the end of the summer? Falling in front of an underground train in London? Sue could collect some insurance. How I feared waking up injured — a failure, and an invalid, too.

Maybe my forgetfulness might intensify until I simply walked away from everything. To where? How?

The passage of a train on the up-line jerked me back into myself. A continuous blur of windows without apparent occupants raced by, a horizontal hurricane. Anita was frowning, checking her watch.

"Look there!" I pointed. More duckbills grazing by a stream. The tallest reared high and began to hoot or bellow.

Quickly the duckbill's fellows followed suit, their weather vanes all swinging alertly in the same direction. Out of a poplar grove there burst a great flesh-eater, its tiny forearms wagging, its mouth agape, full of teeth. Though I pressed my nose to the window, and Anita her cheek, the train whisked us away from witnessing the outcome. Briefly her cheek looked bruised from the pressure of the glass, as if I had slapped her.

"What a monster!" She brushed her hair back into place.

"I think it was a *Gorgosaurus*. . . ." That beast's gaze could turn anyone to stone. "Would you like a cup of coffee from the buffet car, Anita?

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Or a lager? I don't know if you drink. . . ." I shouldn't waste money on anything at railway prices; but nevertheless.

"No, thanks, let's not squander. . . ." She clammed up.

"I don't suppose we travelers get to see many of those big carnivores. They'll be rare."

She grinned ferally. "An omen. Death the destroyer."

Time passed. The land grew scrubbier, barer. A few trees still reared; also clumps of cycads, fern-tipped hairy gray pineapples. A pair of snake-necked lizards that looked like plucked ostriches were racing side by side: their beaked heads held high; slim, three-fingered arms cocked upright, mantis-fashion; long tails tapering straight out behind them. Sprinters for survival from the reek of some carnosaur? Competitors in search of a mate? Hungry to find a meal of eggs somewhere? How far I'd come since leaving New Street Station. Yet in a sense I'd come nowhere really remote. London, rain, and Unicorn Books awaited me in, what, forty minutes. Those sprinting ostrich-lizards had sunk out of sight. Passengers rummaged in their document cases, consulted personal organizers, rustled pink pages of the *Financial Times*.

The train squealed, and I pitched forward. Luggage, macs, unbrellas skidded along the overhead racks. Some items tumbled onto seats, into the aisles. The Intercity wasn't just slowing; the driver was braking in emergency. Braced for the sudden deceleration by her own backward-facing seat, Anita tore at her holdall and pulled out a pistol. Pushing me aside, she hauled her way to the interior door and turned to face the carriage. The train had stopped. I was thunderstruck.

"Everyone listen to me," Anita shouted. "Shut up and listen. This train is being hijacked. Sit still, and you shan't be hurt. Leave your seats without permission, and I'll shoot you; I promise. We have armed people in every carriage. Right, you hear?" Muffled by the two intervening doors, I detected a similar harangue in the next carriage.

A burly young business type with eyebrows like big, hairy caterpillars half-rose. "*Who's* hijacking the train?" Anita gripped her pistol in both hands. "Sit, or you'll be the first!"

"The first?" bleated a middle-aged lady in deep blue twin set and pearls. "How do you mean, the first?"

"Anita. . . ." She was only six feet away from me. My tone pleaded that she should continue whatever relationship we had had, that she should

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not become an utter alien. She favored me with a tight smile.

"Don't worry, *you're* O.K." Raising her voice: "Listen, all, we're the Friends of Asia."

"Who's she when she's at home?" cried a wit.

"Some friends," sneered somebody else. A woman was sobbing.

"We'll be radioing our demands to London. When those are met, our friends will tell the authorities a code phrase to radio to us; so we'll know."

"What demands, miss?" inquired a bespectacled older man. "I mean, are your demands easy to meet? Are they possible?"

"If people who demand the expulsion of immigrants are listened to, then all demands are possible—" A gunshot firecrackered elsewhere. A death, or simply a warning? How easy to be killed here. Barbiturates? No, a bullet. Acting the hero, I needed only to launch myself at Anita. I couldn't do it. I would be exploiting her, staining her hands and her mind, making her a murderess. I would need to assault a different hijacker.

From halfway along the carriage, a suave voice spoke up. "Listen to her, everyone, and be cool. I'm an officer in the SAS. I'm willing to be your special hostage if—"

"You're all hostages!" Anita screamed.

"Quite. But a surplus of hostages is a nuisance. You'd be best advised to hang on to a token number, disembark the majority from the rear of the train as a sign of good faith, let them walk away. I assume regular services will be canceled. A relief train will come to evacuate the people you set free."

"What's your name?"

"Jones, Andrew Jones. Call me Andy."

"Listen, General Jones, we're keeping all of you. We're moving you into the three rear carriages under guard. What sort of hijack lets half the hostages stroll off at the start?"

"An efficient one, miss. For goodness' sake, let's be efficient. I'm no general, by the way. Nothing quite as grand."

"Stand up; let me see you. Don't step into the aisle."

A tall, lean man in his thirties with short, sandy hair made himself evident. He wore a safari suit as if bound for the tropics.

"Identify your luggage. Lift it down with one hand."

A smile played round Jones's lips as he obeyed. "That's good thinking. You're the organizer of this, aren't you?"

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"People: pass that suitcase back here hand to hand. Don't anyone lift it high so it can be thrown." When the suitcase, initialed ARJ, arrived, Anita shouted, "Key!" Jones bowled a ring of keys underarm. Anita let these rebound from the door behind her before kicking them forward in my direction. "Kneel, Bernard, please. Shuffle to the suitcase. Empty it on the floor, then resume your seat."

Jones was eyeing me keenly. Ah, he was wondering how Anita knew my name. If I tackled her from this position, she might fire over my head and miss me.

"Though," drawled Jones, "would I have identified myself if I had a shooter in my luggage?" I emptied out shirts, underwear, after-shave, the usual paraphernalia, and a soft-porn magazine. Sorting with her shoe, Anita glared at the last item. "Too many mouths to feed," said Jones. I was taking a dislike to him.

"We'll be provisioned," Anita assured the carriage at large. "They'll bring up another loco with supplies."

"But not too close?" asked Jones. "I expect you'll be mining the track front and rear with explosives. Oh, half a mile from here so there's no chance of a gas attack."

"That's right, clever clogs. You can stop fishing for details. Park yourself *now*. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the most efficient spot in the world for a hijack. No security checks on the way in. Nobody can storm our train from the Cretaceous period."

A lanky young Sikh, turbaned and scrappily bearded, hauled open the far door. He cradled a pump-action shotgun. "Anita! We read your first script over the radio." His accent was pure nasal Birmingham, too. "Shall I take over here?"

"Yes. And watch out for *that one*. One of the 'Who Dares, Wins' squad. He'll try to soft-talk you."

"It's rather a shame," observed Jones from his seat, "that you can't conduct your private affairs in Punjabi or Bengali. Are you so much of a cross section?"

"That's because we're British," said the Sikh youth.

"Ah, but you'll need safe conduct out of Britain afterward. You can never come back. Don't you feel this rather defeats your purpose?"

"We're willing to sacrifice ourselves. And *you*, too." The Sikh glowered. Someone whimpered.

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Outside: the Cretaceous wilderness. Inside: terrorists with guns.

"There'll be a change to our second communiqué," announced Anita. "We're the Friends of Asia, but this particular action team" — and she smiled acknowledgment at me — "will be known as the Summerfire Brigade. The long, hot summer, hmm?"

I heard myself groan. "No, you can't —"

"Why not? It's an honor."

How could I explain the impossibility of ever publishing a book with the title *Summerfire* if terrorists had made the word notorious, infamous? No other title could suit so well; none. That word was bound up with the whole essence of the sequel; was even foreshadowed in *Springdew*.

"Please —"

Anger clouded Anita. "Might you feel identified as a supporter of Asians?"

"Honestly, it isn't so —" What did the fortunes of one novel matter to people who were willing to lose their homes, even their lives, so that their kin could live securely, in safety? Needless to say, hijacking a trainload of other citizens was utterly the wrong way to improve conditions, almost guaranteed to provoke a backlash, to set racial hatred on the boil instead of quenching it (unless, of course, it shocked the country and the government toward sanity). Anita and her friends couldn't see that far. I squinted at the scar on her cheek. Instead of merely subsisting in fear and despair, Anita and company acted out of that despair. Theirs was a big despair; mine was a small despair. Yet my small despair was everything to me: my misery, mine — just as its source had once been my joy.

How exalted Sue and I had been just three years earlier. The fine reviews, the prize, the promises. How full of the future, how confident when I quit my job. "You'll starve," warned my colleagues; and I grinned. They had only narrow horizons. How quickly the money went; then Sue's health had decayed after that terrible bug that never really left her. Insidious new bugs were mutating all the time these days, educated by the antibiotics in food, in so many people's bodies. Allergies were rampant. Britain's farmers were busily breeding diseases. Oh no, we didn't starve. This was Britain, the society of debt, which now I couldn't repay. Oh Renaissance, oh world of *Summerfire*, where had you gone to?

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Outside: the Cretaceous wilderness. Inside: terrorists with guns. Events had overtaken. I laughed, surrendering myself and *Summerfire* with relief. Anita regarded me quizzically before heading down to the front of the train.

True to promise, all passengers were herded into the hindmost three carriages, which we occupied to capacity. A member of the Summerfire Brigade stood guard within each; a couple more patrolled the track on either side of the train, with binoculars and walkie-talkies; occasionally we heard footsteps on the roof. A lanky, armed girl called Indira acted as toilet escort. "At least we have an Indian waitress to show us to our seats," said the wit, to chuckles, followed by a stream of threats from our guard, Rajit. No toilet for two hours! The wit became unpopular. And, no, Indira wasn't a waitress. No food or drink was served.

Jones had contrived to sit beside me; and it was possible to whisper. He thought I might be of use as a kind of perverse mascot. If only I could put myself in Anita's way, she might give me a guided tour. But she didn't reappear. Our carriage, with its great expanse of glass, didn't become a hothouse. Maybe the Swanson field filtered the sunlight. Thank God no babies or young kids were present. Toward evening, billows of cumulus rolled across the west to become a palette for the sinking sun. As light failed, Rajit withdrew to the vestibule between carriages, leaving us hostages alone.

"I'm awfully thirsty—"

"When are they going to feed us—?"

Jones stood up. "My name's Captain Andy Jones. I'd advise you all to exercise in moderation. Stretch your legs. Take turns to walk around, but don't crowd the aisle. Be ready to sit down immediately. Don't talk much. I presume our Summerfire friends brought drink and food for themselves, though first they'll be using what's in the buffet car. *We* have to wait for whatever the authorities send down the line."

"How soon—?"

"Tomorrow maybe. Try to avoid drinking from the faucet in the toilet. It isn't drinking water. Don't want to upset our tummies, do we? Exercise a bit, then try to sleep."

"Aren't we going to try to have a go, Captain? Overcome that Rajit chap? Sneak off up the line in the dark?"

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"These people might be amateurs, but they aren't acting stupidly . . . yet. Half will have rested while others are on duty. I estimate there'll be at least twenty terrorists. We could stir up a hornets' nest. Get killed. So stretch your legs, then sit tight."

Torchlight glowed intermittently in the vestibule. Now and then a powerful beam flooded through the glass in the partition door, sweeping our carriage, a minor search light. I snoozed and woke, snoozed and woke. But I didn't shiver; I didn't twitch.

In the morning my throat was dry, and my belly grumbled. Day dawned bright, the Cretaceous uninviting hereabouts — even to its denizens, so it seemed. Rajit returned, looking chirpy; must have kipped in first-class style while a replacement stood guard.

"Shut your mouths!" he shouted. "You sound like a nestful of little birdies all squawking. I'm the hawk; so watch it."

At noon it happened. . . .

Our carriage sagged, groaning and squeaking. The sun beat warm through my window. Outside, the vista was startlingly clear; the faint intervening membrane was gone. Voices were shouting. Rajit turned his head; Jones tensed but relaxed. "Oh sod it," he said mildly.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Swanson field's been switched off somehow. We're in phase."

"What —?"

"We're in the Cretaceous. The train, the tracks. They've cut us loose. No giving in to terrorism, eh? We're really here; we're in the past." His voice rose. "They've ditched us."

"What are you saying?" cried Rajit.

"We need to speak to your boss, to Anita. This man and myself."

"Me, too?" I asked.

"You're the mascot," muttered Jones.

An hour passed before we were summoned to the driver's cab.

On the way, Jones scrutinized each brown face we passed.

No hijacker was asleep now. In the foremost prison carriage, an Asian businessman sat beside a black Caribbean, both hostages eyeing other prisoners nervously. The Asian looked bruised and shaken; I spotted dried blood on his lip. Had his fellow travelers given him stick during the night? Jones noted the litter of empty drink cans and sandwich wrappers in the

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buffet as we headed through; he didn't beg for a drink. He was obliged to wear handcuffs for this visit up front. Not me, though. Maybe the Friends of Asia had brought only two sets of cuffs in their kit bags. The other was shackling the driver, a grizzled, stocky fellow in his fifties who squatted on the floor of his cab.

"My friend Bernard," Anita said softly. "And the general." She did her best to look nonchalant as she pointed her pistol at him. Including our escort, three other hijackers crowded the cab, one of whom looked sick with worry. He'd been prepared to die, but not for what had occurred.

"Captain, actually," said Jones. He introduced himself to the man on the floor. The driver grimaced.

"I'm Davy Cray. They said this could never happen. Fact is, they said it was impossible. A train in the time tube is a *mass* belonging to the present. Track, too; the track anchors us. That's what they said. Said you'd have to take up the track before you could turn the field off. That's how it uses so little power. Once something's in, it sort of sustains itself."

"The field may have a minimum strength it can't fall below, Dave. It might also have a maximum value. Push beyond that, and . . . here's the result. I did hear how some of the research was classified. Obviously it didn't deliver anything very practical. Not much point in dumping people 80 million years in the past if you destroy the transmission system and can never bring them back."

"Never?" grumbled Cray. "This'll be the most overdue service in history."

"Won't it just! Not even the rust will arrive anywhere." Jones turned to Anita, whose face was beaded with sweat. In fact, the whole interior was warming up. "Look outside; it's semiarid. Ten or fifteen miles back, there's water; there are animals. We'll starve and die of thirst unless we all leave now."

"Leave the train: is that what they want us to do? We mustn't do what they want."

"Why should they *care* what we do? We've been abandoned, damn it! The government refuses to be blackmailed. You know the policy on airline hijacks. Delay, and your hostages will be too weak for the trek, Anita. Stay here and die, or head back to where there's life: it's that simple."

"Surely they wouldn't sacrifice a couple of hundred people — and a train, and the whole track! Just toss it all away! Write it off!"

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"I think they might. You're to blame, not them. I'm loyal, but . . . the truth wouldn't get into the media. They could open two new Swanson gates to link Birmingham and London. Lay new track. Business as usual in a few months, sealed off from the Cretaceous. They wouldn't put the new line where you could see the old."

"Nobody would travel by Intercity again," protested Cray. "Not if you can be lost out here."

"The public wouldn't find out! I know how the news is filtered. The Summerfire Brigade damaged the gates; made the field break down — that's what they'd say. In the future there'd be security checks at Intercity stations; screening of luggage, as at airports. You need to get all these people out of here as soon as can be, Anita. I know survival. It's possible fifteen, twenty miles back. You have your guns. There's big game to shoot."

"You suggesting we eat dinosaurs?" asked Cray. "We can't eat bloody dinosaurs."

"They're protein, same as ourselves. There'll be fish, fruit, eggs, nuts." Jones licked parched lips. "There'll be water. You need to form us up and march us, Anita. Forget about the Friends of Asia and all such future trouble. That's millions of years away. We're all in the same boat now. True, there'll be resentments and bitterness. You'll need to remain a brigade till people adjust their thinking. Yes, a brave brigade."

"Commanded by you?" said Anita.

"Advised, only advised."

She grinned as if she had caught Jones out in a fib. "Mr. Cray needs only to reverse the train. This is diesel, not electric."

"Didn't you hear the rails buckle as we settled?"

"I did," agreed Cray. "They'll be buggered up. Weight of this train on them, with no proper underpinning? Sand and hollows."

"You could drive slowly."

"Naw, we'd derail."

Anita was thinking rapidly. "Why should we lumber ourselves with all of you? Tell me, Bernard, tell me."

I, too, thought for a while. "Because we're fellow human beings."

This provoked a bitter laugh. "What drove us to hijack you, hmm? Was it all the fellow humanity we experienced in our own country?"

"You might have firearms," said Jones, "but can you aim straight enough to kill an animal?"

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"Maybe we'll take *you* with us. You want to save your own life, eh? As for two hundred people who hate us. . . ." She touched her scar. "Why, we'd be murdered one by one. Isn't that likely, Sanji?"

Our escort, Sanji, nodded.

"And we might take Bernard to tell us stories. The tale of *Summerfire.* We can find him a *Triceratops* to eat."

I was remembering my glimpse of *Gorgosaurus.* Could pistols or shotguns stop such a monster? Ah, the brigade possessed explosives. Why should Anita invite me to come along? Because I'd been decent to her on the platform, in the carriage? Would I become a kind of jester?

"If it's all right with you lot," said Jones, "I'd prefer to stay with the hostages. Since you won't take responsibility, they'll need a spot of advice."

That was a mistake. "A spot of organizing into your own little army? You're certainly coming with us, Captain Jones. Sanji, tell Abdullah to disarm the explosives; pack them up. Mr. Kelly here will carry them. Pass the word that we're heading north."

"Hey, what about me?" said Cray.

"You're the skipper. So you're in charge of your passengers."

"They won't understand any of this. They'll want to stay put."

"Let them. Let them wait for as long as they like. Just don't head north, Mr. Cray. We wouldn't welcome seeing that mob again."

I TRUDGED A clear two hundred yards behind the brigade, as befitted a bearer of explosives in hot sunshine. Anita didn't want me any closer, nor must I fall behind, or I'd be screamed at. The straps of the heavy bag cut into my shoulders; its bulk banged my spine. This was preferable to carrying my burden by hand for mile after mile. I staggered, slipped in the sandy soil. Summerfire had baked me for a couple of hours as we followed the guideway of the railway northward. Rather than stumbling over sleepers, we preferred to keep parallel to the track. At least I wasn't thirsty or starved. Before departure, Jones and I received a blessed Coke and a can of cold baked beans. We had halted for drinks and chocolate biscuits since.

Loaded with a backpack, handcuffed Jones marched with the main body of the brigade, whose identities still mostly eluded me. Sanji, I knew, and Rajit. Indira and Abdullah. Oh, and Anita, of course. Counting her

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and Indira, four of the twenty-two-strong brigade were girls. Most members remained nameless faces, me being so far to the rear. What would be happening back at the train itself? How was Cray coping with a couple of hundred thirsty, hungry passengers, who really had no hope of survival whatever? Would they try to straggle south, or just stay where they were? Cruel fate, cruel.

A rushing shadow jerked my sweat-salty gaze aloft: pterosaur the size of a vulture drifted overhead on leathery wings, alert for carrion. Well, *this* item of carrion was still moving! Soon there'd be carcasses enough beside the Intercity. . . .

Vegetation was growing lusher. Strands of trees, flowers, herbage. Clouds were massing, gray with rain. We didn't need a soaking at this stage. I thought I recognized the poplar groves from which the *Gorgosaurus* had erupted; and there was a duckbill, its weather vane swinging!

Ever so faintly, I thought I heard the humming of a train.

Out of absolutely nowhere, two gray helicopters appeared. They hovered motionless just above the track, one behind the other. The rowdy growl of engines and swishing thrash of rotors erupted into the silence. A cannon barbette jutted beneath the nose of each, minigun pods under the wing stubs. Rotating toward the brigade, the two choppers surged. Fire raked the hijackers. Dirt exploded upward, all within seconds.

Throwing myself flat, freeing my shoulders from the bag. I rolled over and over into a dip. I could hear the choppers banking, returning, laying down another hammering of fire. Did a solitary pistol shot crack in reply?

"Anita!" I screamed. For in my mind's eye, I had seen the *Gorgosaurus* of the future snatch her in its jaws, spit her young body out as gobbets.

I lay frozen till silence descended again. Both gunships had landed; then I peered.

By this date I'm fairly sure what had happened, though naturally the procedures were never explained to me. Over the radio the brigade had already specified the whereabouts of the train — based, I don't know, on the loco's mileage gauge? Thus, the relief train, bearing food and drink to the hostages, would halt well short of the booby traps. So as to maroon our train and the track, apparently forever, the Swanson gates were overloaded. Psychologists must have worked overtime predicting what the hijackers would do next. Uptime, doubtless while New Street and Euston stations were cordoned off, new Swanson gates were hastily installed:

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gates with a difference, which researchers had devised. As soon as the field was restored, those two choppers flew through to follow the time tube with absolute precision. Unseen from the Cretaceous side, the choppers hunted for the hijackers. Finding us, they hovered, for the pilots could see into the past as clearly as through a window. The command pilot radioed to switch off the field, by whatever new unorthodox means, for a specified length of time. Possibly the fact that the helicopters were airborne, floating free, allowed them to be released, then snared again subsequently? The gunships emerged right beside the brigade, and destroyed it.

Including Captain Jones. His misfortune to be in their midst.

Raising my face from the grass to peer, I thought for a moment that my "rescuers" weren't from my uptime Britain at all. Two armed gray creatures with snouted and goggled heads stood examining the carnage. Why were they wearing protective suits? The air was fine to breathe, almost dizzying in its purity. Scrambling up, I hoisted my hands and called out, "I'm a hostage."

Snouts swung in my direction, but I guessed they wouldn't shoot me. While waiting to pounce, they had ample time to suss me out, a white face limping in the rear. Obviously I was with the Summerfire Brigade, yet not of it. And besides, they would need information.

One of the choppers stayed behind in the Cretaceous, no doubt to take command of the train. For the flight back to the present day along the rekindled Swanson tube in the other helicopter, *I* had to wear a protective suit.

Was the biological contamination suit and subsequent sterile quarantine a mere pretext, or a vital precaution? I don't know. Eighty million years is a long time. Viruses and bacteria that were thriving during the Cretaceous could have died out, disappeared, mutated and evolved into something more familiar during all those intervening millenia, just as the dinosaurs died out, just as other creatures evolved. An original Cretaceous bug might wreak havoc in the modern world. Scores of mice and guinea pigs and monkeys were exposed to the blood of us who returned. So my new captors insist.

I'm ignorant of any details of how the Intercity passengers were rescued, though I'm assured that they *were*. Maybe that's a lie; but I pre-

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sume that small helicopters carried water and rations to the train, then, in threes and fours over several days, the hostages were ferried to London and Birmingham wearing those special suits, to be debriefed in isolation and observed . . . and finally released, back to their families?

I was less lucky.

"Now, why did these terrorists really name themselves the Summerfire Brigade, Mr. Kelly?" asks the intercom for the umpteenth time. Various voices interrogate me from behind the one-way mirror; this one I know all too well.

"I've told you till I'm blue in the face."

"Don't go blue in the face, Mr. Kelly, or we'll suspect the worst. Why did you go along with the brigade? The real reason this time."

"I didn't go *along* with them — I didn't agree with them at all!"

"So why did you accompany them?" Most of the time this is a kindly, patient voice; it can also shout.

"Why was Captain Jones accompanying them?" I ask.

"He was handcuffed; you weren't."

"I'm astonished you could tell *who* was handcuffed, the way those cannons tore the bodies apart!" Oh, I can be defiant, a little of the time; I can also be reduced to begging.

"Do you have many Irish family connections, Mr. Kelly?"

"Don't you already know?"

"So why did you visit Caithness three years ago?"

Up at the flat, empty top of Scotland. . . .

"We had spare money. Decided to hire a car and drive all the way to John o' Groat's." Squandering money on a whim, because the cornucopia had opened — only a small cornucopia, soon empty. Caithness must be where experiments into new applications of the Swanson effect are carried out; hidden away, classified. In the eyes of the authorities, maybe I'm not just a sympathizer with Asian hijackers and a possible accomplice of Irish terrorists, but also a spy. Hardly very likely, given my background; though perhaps, ever since the Anthony Blunt scandal, all art historians are suspect. Questions circle round and round. I know that I've brushed against the edge of something highly secret — and military? — to do with time travel, I presume. Travel, not restricted to the Cretaceous? The Swanson effect must have other possibilities beyond mere Intercity tube travel. Unobvious at first, now of desperate interest.

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"When can I speak to my wife?" I ask.

"She's ill. Her nerves. Don't worry; she's being taken care of."

"My daughter?"

"When you've answered all our questions adequately. You might tell Juliette something unwise. So, for your daughter's own sake — if you take my meaning. . . ."

"I want to talk to my daughter."

"Why such concern? You seem to have lived with them during the past year or so more as a cover than *en famille*."

No! Juliette had never really whined at me, or been selfish — not excessively so. I thought now of her kindness and humor, her esprit. The strain I'd been under had been warping my own personality, distorting my vision. I had wronged her. Why should I let some plausible swine tell me that I didn't love Juliette deeply? Or Sue? In ultimate *extremis*, one learns love, and loyalty. Perhaps when it's too late. . . .

So I might tell Juliette something unwise?

I'm a writer, aren't I? Supposed to be. When I first returned to Birmingham, my grief for *Summerfire* knew no bounds. My own small despair, my special misery, remember? I supposed that I would be released from quarantine within a few days. What else could I do but climb onto my treadmill again, to wear that albatross that had almost fallen from my neck in the Cretaceous; almost turned into a pterosaur and flown away? — except that a novel with such a title had become virtually impossible to contemplate. Oh, I grieved, furiously, for Anita. But I'd lost my pet word, too, my wretched talisman, which had come to represent the whole book.

Then I decided otherwise. Maybe Anita had given me the greatest of gifts: publicity and stimulus. I must write an account of the hijack: *With the Summerfire Brigade in the Upper Cretaceous*. An utterly honest, writerly account. What other author had walked through that landscape of 80 million years ago, amidst such dramatic events? Surely this would be published worldwide in many languages. Injected with money and energy, I would finish *Summerfire* itself. That novel would soar into orbit on the booster of the memoir.

First I must leave this sterile suite of rooms. Next I need to escape from Britain; but how can I? I'm a hostage still, to the rescue itself; about which I knew too much, not least the way the Asian brigade were mown down in

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coldblood. Even the little I know casts a very long shadow. So how can I be set free?

"Let's give it another spin, Mr. Kelly. How did you dream up the word 'Summerfire'?"

Abruptly, as if a light has switched on in my brain, I understand. The questions are clues; disregard the redundant, nit-picking ones, and the others fit together neatly. The government is thinking of offering our immigrant population a journey back in time, a new start, maybe not in the age of dinosaurs, but in some period more recent — say, 5 million or 10 million years ago, if research has made the Swanson effect more flexible.

That won't be repatriation. The people will still all be in Britain! The immigrants will be safer in the past. They can build new lives, with aid and supplies. What strains will be relieved! If the government wasn't thinking along these lines prior to the hijack, surely now it is. The Summerfire Brigade has shown the way.

If the government had been so thinking, could the Friends of Asia conceivably have got wind of the scheme? Am I a link between Caithness and the brigade? I have no idea what Anita's demands were. Does anyone among the general public know? Maybe the brigade can be presented now not as villains but as heroes, martyrs to this very cause — tootling their kin back in time the way that the Pied Piper tootled the rats of Hamelin. Presented so, by some ingenious writer? Who knows how the news can be twisted? And after the transfer of population, the Swanson field won't be switched off finally, oh no. Not unless some strange 10-million-year-old bug makes such draconian action necessary.

I feel sick. Oh Sue, oh Juliette, oh *Summerfire*. Oh Anita, oh rediscovered loves and loyalties.

"Well, Mr. Kelly?"

"It all started with *Springdew*," I say cautiously. "That was my third novel, the brick, the breakthrough. I wrote it while I was teaching classes about the Renaissance—"

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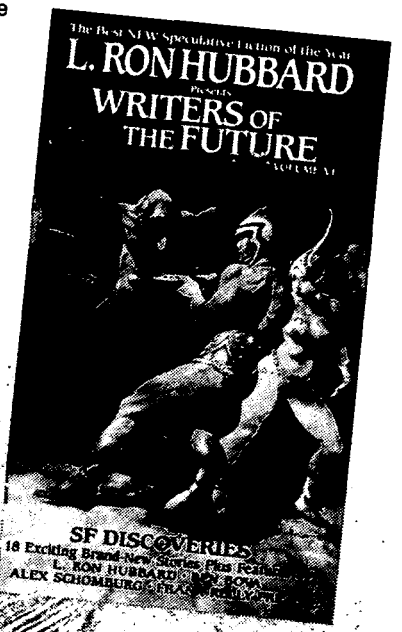

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Earth, David Brin, Bantam, $19.95 . . . and some thoughts occasioned thereby

EARTH IS set fifty years in the future, in which we begin with the discovery that Alex Lustig has accidentally dropped a black hole into the Earth. Not a very large black hole, to be sure, but inevitably fatal, unless Alex can find the resources to fund a search for it and the resources to swing it out beyond the crust before it eats it up. But soon enough he discovers that this is only the beginning situation, and that many, many other things and other people are involved.

Jen Wollling is another one of the principal actors, as are Teresa Tikhana, Pedro Manella, Logan Eng and his daughter, Claire, and his wife, or ex-wife, Daisy McClennon; George Hutton, Nelson Grayson . . . I could go on.

Thus, one of the damnedest books in many a year; a sprawling giant of a book, populated by a cast of extremely contentious people, who in the end prove to be as susceptible to the charms of superscience as the veriest E.E. Smith hero. And like all superscience novels, this one is presented with an invarying tone of sobriety. Perhaps it deserves to be; its topic, after all, is the Earth herself . . . an Earth in trouble not just from the events of the novel, which are, God knows, enough to give one serious pause, but an Earth in actual trouble. Look out your window, and you will see some signs that Earth is in trouble.

In the end — and it is a far, far different world when we end than it was when we began — enough has happened so that many of our most cherished places are no longer there, and our entire position in the Universe has had to be reassessed. All in fifty years' time.

The fifty years bothers me, in a way. I know that if a superscience novel is going to be good — and this is a superscience novel in many, but not all, ways — and a good one — things have to happen fast. And I know that fifty years is actually a long time, if we consider,

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for instance, the evolution in aircraft, personal transportation and food distribution between 1903 and 1953. No novelist could make that change believeable. Which is my point in this case; I have no doubt that similarly vast changes will actually have taken place by 2040 . . . but I don't believe it. And I have to wonder . . . *does* change take place exponentially, as was the popular model of a few years ago, or does it go through periods of fundamental change, in which things happen very fast, and then slow down for a period of consolidation? I teeter on the horns of a dilemma between what I know is inevitable and what I believe.

Does it, in other words, seem likely that Alex Lustig will be able to create a black hole fifty years from today? Does it seem likely that giant Arks will be built to house the world's endangered species? Does it seem likely that in a mere fifty years, we *will* be in *serious* danger from sunlight no longer being blocked by the ozone layer? Mind you, the question is not are we going to be able to do it at some time, are we going to be in peril at *some* time. The question is will it be fifty years? And with that, we come to the crux of this novel; does it make you think about its message? And the answer is You Betcha Life; you may quarrel about the time scale, but you have to think about it, and in thinking about it you think about all the things Brin has wrapped around it.

Among the things Brin has wrapped around it is this superscience plot, and that, I think, is not germane to this discussion. You will like it, I think, and you will likely thrill to it, I think, and it is not what this novel's about.

I want to speak less of this novel than of its message. For one thing, it is extremely difficult to speak of it and not give away its plot line and its ending. You should get this book, and find these things out for yourself. For another, there are, I think, the usual David Brin things wrong with it, along with the many David Brin things right with it, but I don't think I can effect any change, there. The things wrong are a certain lack of discipline, which is a pretty nebulous concept that nobody can discuss meaningfully, and a tendency to have things happen offstage at peculiar intervals. He will go along just fine, tackling three or four things in a row with panache, and then he will get a character into a perilous situation — Nelson, for instance — and have it resolve offstage, for no discernible reason but to the novel's harm. But not its terminal harm, and, as I said, I don't think I can effect a change in Brin, so what's the odds?

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So I would like to speak more to the novel's message, which is, I think, that the Earth is in terminal trouble unless we do something. And I don't mean just any old thing; something *effective*. Is this true?

Probably; very probably. There are persistent indications that the disposable diaper problem is not anywhere near as bad as we thought, that the greenhouse effect is much more complicated than we usually say, and so forth, but the bottom line is where does all this extend if this goes on, and the answer is disastrous. There are already too many of us for the technology to support, under our present political system.

We are at a point in technology where we can make a thousand things so cheaply that we can afford to throw them away when they are exhausted, but we are not yet at a point where we can make them disappear after we throw them away. We are, apparently, poking a hole in the ozone layer, and that can't be good. And we are most assuredly burning the rainforest, with no assurance whatsoever that we are going to find some cost-effective way to replace it as an oxygen generator and carbon dioxide sink. (The question of why in the world we should be seeking a cost-effective way, when all we have to do is not burn the rainforest, is another order of issue; one we shall not touch upon, because the discussion bogs down right there.)

Mind you, this is a book review column, and I can hear Ed Ferman stirring around very restlessly indeed even as we speak.

So I will tread lightly here. But it seems to me the main trouble — at this early stage in Earth's problems, which it is — is that we are divided into nations, and the nations are at different technological levels. That is, the farmers who are burning the rainforest feel no relationship whatsoever with you and me, more or less on the model of you and I really feeling much kinship with the Canadians who are the principal victims of acid rain. And so it goes.

A one-world approach would do more than anything else to ameliorate the problem, but to even think in those terms is the most idle form of dreaming. It's not cost-effective, in spades. That leaves, really only one answer, when all is said and done: to say and do everything we can, and then trust that homeostasis will enable some humans to survive in some fashion, rather than proceed to a complete wipeout and the slow evolution of our replacement as king of this particular hill. I believe that with luck, we will have spread beyond the Solar System before the wipeout happens, so that some few outposts of humanity

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will survive. Given a few, we will once again become many, in time, and repeat the process of despoliation on several planets instead of just one.

Now — not only have I in fact reviewed *Earth*, but I have made you feel better, too. I think that was David Brin's essential message, under the optimistic superscience plot, and I don't know what more I can do with it. I wish the news were better.

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Thomas the Rhymer, Ellen Kushner (Morrow, cloth, 224pp, $16.95)

ELLEN KUSHNER is a throwback. I think she's doing it on purpose, in fact. Her first novel, *Swordspoint*, was a marvelous Graustark novel, in that wonderful tradition of nonmagical imaginary kingdoms that was almost buried in the avalanche of Tolkien-ish muddle-earths in the last two decades. And now, with *Thomas the Rhymer*, she seems to be doing the same sort of thing to Elizabethan magical romance.

What has been lost, in most contemporary American medieval fantasies , is Wonderland. Our best fantasists, rejecting warmed-over Tolkien and ersatz Robert E. Howard, have found various antidotes. Bruce Fergusson and Paul Parks have freshened their fantasies with an infusion of grimy realism: David Smeds and Stephen Boyett have brought their imagined worlds of sensibility of the best of anthropological science fiction; Lisa Goldstein and Megan Lindholm have invented new magics to fit our contemporary world; Stephen King and Charles de Lint have taken the old magic and set it into urban spaces. What almost no one seems to attempt is the opposite of all these strategies, for where they all represent a move toward realism, it is also possible to freshen our fantasies by rediscovering and reinventing wonder.

Thomas the Rhymer is realistic enough to please the most sophisticated contemporary fantasy audience — Kushner actually knows how people in England at this time lived,

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what they did with the hours of their days, and their manners of speech and behavior. None of this phony ostentatious Elizabethan English from her — she gives us the flavor of another language without rubbing our noses in it. But behind the realism there is something else going on, as we discover when itinerant bard and bedder-of-ladies Thomas the Rhymer finds himself consort of the Queen of Faerie. As Thomas moves through Faerie, he sees things and experiences things that aren't directly connected to the action of the story. That is, the world is wider and deeper than it needs to be. And what he sees are not sociological details or extra bits of disgusting muck to make us feel like this place is more real; what he sees are merely strange and wonderful, to make us realize that we are in an Other place. Outside of *Faerie Queene* it's hard for me to remember other writers who have done this particularly well. Tolkien had some elements of it, with the Tom Bombadil sequence, for instance, and some of the side stories in the poems and songs — but where Tolkien stopped the action cold for these wonders, Kushner never stops. She packs more good story into 224 pages than most writers can get into a trilogy.

The story is still not a "great" one, in part because it is too slim a volume to hold that large a work, and in part because her Rhymer is more trickster than hero. But it does not slight this early work of hers to recognize that her magnum opus lies ahead. Nobody is writing more elegant and gorgeous English these days than Ellen Kushner. Her books ought to be given to writing classes as texts in how the English language can be made so pure and cold and clear that you long to drink it down. But no, that's a bad idea — student writers are already too prone to get depressed, and comparing one's prose to Kushner's is likely to provoke thoughts of self-destruction.

Let's just say Kushner is still playing with old traditions that seemed to be dead, and showing us that their burial was indeed premature. Is there anything this writer can't do well?

Daily Voices, Lisa Goldstein (Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440. "Author's Choice Monthly." cloth, 100pp, various prices depending on edition)

If you pointed a gun at my head and made me choose the best storyteller working in English as of the beginning of 1990, this is the name I'd say: Lisa Goldstein. *A Mask for the General* and *Tourists* were both brilliant, imaginative, disturbing,

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and truthful novels. She effortlessly (or so it seems) fills her pages with living characters, provocative ideas, well-developed communities and settings, and stories that move and entertain us. And she does all this with language that feels as clear and natural as if she slipped the thoughts into our heads.

Alas, Goldstein has written only a few short stories, all of which to date have appeared in a single magazine — and not this one, so you may not have seen them. Thanks to Pulphouse Publishing, however, you can now rectify this sad lack in your life. Story collections are regarded by publishers as iffy propositions at best — they never sell as well as novels by the same author — and when you've got somebody like Goldstein, who has only five short stories — and I mean short — ordinarily there'd not be a chance in hell of getting a publisher to bring them out separately. But Pulphouse has decided that what such authors need is a slim, elegant hardcover targeted for the elite of the book-buying audience, accompanied by a relatively inexpensive trade paperback for those who have to choose between buying a book and eating lunch. It's a lovely compromise and I hope Pulphouse makes a profit on it, so that they can keep bringing us books like this one.

What's in the book? Goldstein's introduction is clever, and tells exactly the things about her stories that I always *want* authors to tell. The stories "Death Is Different" and "Tourists" are set in the same magical erewhon as her novel *Tourists*, which, for those who have read the book, will be enough information to make you write to Pulphouse for your copy. (I must point out that the short story and the novel, though they have title and setting in common, are completely different and almost unrelated stories.)

"Ever After" is a whimsical tale of what happens to Cinderella *after* marrying the prince — and yet, despite the biting satire in it, its ending is actually more hopeful (and perhaps as much of a fairy tale!) as the ending of the original. "Cassandra's Voices" is a neat little Twilight Zone-ish story about a man who finds out that "knowing" your future doesn't mean you actually *know* it. And "Daily Voices" is a scary little plunge into madness that will probably end up in every high school story anthology — or would, if the people who edit those things actually want young people to learn to enjoy studying literature.

The Tery, F. Paul Wilson (Baen, paper, 246pp, $3.50)

The reason this book exists is

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made clear on the page after the last page of the text, which consists of an announcement: "The further adventures of Steven Dalt (and Pard) will continue in HEALER, coming soon from BAEN BOOKS." If this book were not the anchor of a series, I don't think it would exist, because it consists of a trio of stories that are definitely early work of a writer who has become much more accomplished and sophisticated in the years since they first came out (1972, 1973, 1978). And yet, unpolished as they are (though the title story, which is also the one from 1978, is considerably better than the other two), you can still see in them the strong sense of story as an emotional experience that raises some writers above the common run of science fictioneers.

"The Tery" is the story of an apelike semi-human misfit whose parents are slaughtered in a pogrom by racial purists. He falls in with a group of telepaths who are also fleeing the same persecutors, concealing from them the fact that he can speak and understand their language so that they can talk perhaps too freely in front of them. He is befriended by the young girl who is the only member of their group *not* to have telepathic abilities. He becomes their spy, penetrating the fortress of their enemies through a hellish dungeon of genetic experiments gone awry, where he discovers that he and they are all the results of genetic games played by their ancestors — so that they truly are brothers under the skin.

This would have been a wonderful story if it *weren't* part of the series — that is, if we hadn't also had to have a really lame set-up in which the Tery is the Christ-figure in a future religion, and if we hadn't had to put up with the intervention of the series hero, a vanilla non-character named Steven Dalt. Even though he gets involved in the plot, he isn't part of the *story* because he really has no stake in it — he's going to ride off into the sunset untouched after having saved everybody. And I can't help but think that Wilson — this is the guy who wrote the wonderful future-detective story "Dydeetown Girl", you remember — was well aware of the shortcomings of the tale. But at some point somebody said. "Hey, it's good enough as it is. We'll publish it this way, and you spend your time on new stuff."

And whoever said that was right. *The Tery* is, in fact, "good enough," especially for newer readers of science fiction who are, perhaps, less sensitive to cliche and less demanding of plot and character. It's a good read; I enjoyed it. And if this were a first book by a new author I'd probably be pointing him

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out to you as somebody to watch, because this book is long on talent even though it's short on polish. But Wilson has taught us in the intervening years to expect more from him, and I do, and so this one doesn't work.

I'm not against writers recycling their old work — but I think we also have a responsibility to rewrite it, transforming it into our best work, if we are releasing it to our audience as if it were something new. And if we don't have time to do that, or don't care enough, then perhaps we ought to wait to allow it to be published until we do.

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Thanks to Paul Carter for sending us this strong and stylish story, first published in 1930, yet levels above most of what passes for "horror" or psychological suspense these days. Its author was fiction editor of the Ladies Home Journal and was married to novelist Struthers Burt. The Burts were also cattle ranchers in Wyoming in the 1930's, and both wrote books about the West.

Herself

By Katharine Newlin Burt

NOT TO LET Mother know . . . not to let Mother know!

Mother's face had a sort of radiance. That was what the little girl feared: fear ran all along her spine and travelled through her blood in separate chilly vessels when she thought of that radiance in Mother's face as it turned toward her. She could see it watching from the window, always shining there, ready to dazzle into a smile, ready to light her little journeyings from this side of the garden to that. She wanted to escape from it, to avoid it. Sometimes she put her arm across her face. Then Mother laughed: "What you hiding from, Poppet?" The little girl would call out, "F'om you, mom," and that was the truth. But it was not a playful truth, it was a serious one. Mother's radiance was terrible.

When she was released from it — for sometimes a caller would come and sometimes a servant for consultation and sometimes Mother would lie down for a little rest — she ran about like a lamed bird, fluttered, sang

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low, sang shrill, and ended always back of the peony hedge where the sun-flowers grew against the wall. Under the brick wall a ditch had been dug, a dry ditch now, though once it had drained off the garden. It went under an arch. Through this came in that other girl, to whom she had given a quaint name, *Herself.*

Herself, dirty, tangled, rowdy-haired, hoarse-whispering, Herself, who was not afraid, Herself, who knew everything that little girls were not supposed to know. Herself, who liked dirt, the filthier the better, who liked to pull off butterfly's wings, and who didn't care. She didn't care. She didn't care. Like a worm in the earth, she wriggled about, not caring. She would laugh at God. She would mock Him. She knew things about boys, knew the ugly way that babies come, too ugly and too interesting for Mother to tell. Mother had a pretty story about a stork and angels, pretty clean white fat babies lying asleep on water-lily pads. Pretty. Everything Mother told her was pretty. Heaven. Guardian angels. Even God . . . a big kind man with wings. Sleep was kind. The Dark was a beautiful angel who wrapped you in a loving cloak. That other girl knew better. Sleep was . . . Dreams. Naughty dreams. You had your own way. You didn't care. The Dark was full of all the Things you had been told not to see. Devils were in the dark. Ghosts. Bloody murderers and whispering thieves. That made life fun. If you didn't care. That other girl said that God was not a kind old man. He forgave you only because Jesus Christ had let men put nails into His hands and feet. That was the price of forgiveness. If it hadn't been for that, He would have sent you into an everlasting fire to roast. And Jesus did it because He had been sent to do it. God liked suffering but Jesus didn't want to die. He cried and prayed. But God forced Him to let Himself be killed. He might have gone away. But God told Him to stay and be scourged and killed. So you were washed in His blood. Did you like to be washed in blood? That was not pretty. But it was exciting. The girl scratched her leg with a big thorn and showed you blood. She smeared it all over. You got it on your face. Blood.

That strange child wanted to come into the house. She was not afraid of Mother. Mother was a liar. Mother was scared. Mother had to pretend that things were pretty. Herself was not scared. Let her come into the house just once. She wanted to make it dirty, please! She wanted to stick out her tongue at Mother. Wanted to say Something Bad. To see how Mother looked. Perhaps Mother would punish her. To be whipped, that was exciting.

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In the midst of one of these hidden interviews, Mother would call, "Where are you precious?" That was the signal to run to meet Mother and kiss her and hug her as though she would never be done . . . close, close, so that Mother might not see the little smear of blood upon her face.

One day that other child followed close and quietly and came into the house. Mother had a long talk with her, took her away into the South Parlor. They were shut in a long time. The child was terrible. Mother whipped her. That made Mother cry, but the child only pretended to cry. She yelled because she was excited and wanted all the house to hear and to admire her. After the whipping she stayed always in the house. Mother was sad, her radiance faded a little but that girl stayed. There were no explanations.

All this drew Mother and her little daughter very close and made them very dear to each other. They did not talk much about the other child. They tried to forget.

But all the while, instead of forgetting, the loving daughter wondered why she had let a stranger come into the house? Why had she ever let it be seen by Mother? That was the terrible mistake. That was what made life hard. Before that, she had enjoyed knowing the queer, bad girl. It had been a horrid, fascinating sort of secret, an adventure. Now it wasn't that. It was unhappiness and shame. She knew that she should have driven that one away . . . out there by the old ditch. She should never have listened to her wild bad talk. She should not have allowed her to follow into the house.

She wept, "Mother darling, why don't you get rid of that girl?"

Mother stroked the long sleek golden hair.

"I can't do that, my precious, unless you will help me."

"I'll help you, Mother. Let's try."

They tried. They were cruel. They starved her, they left her out long bitter nights in the frosty garden. They hoped that she might run away. All night long the little girl indoors could not sleep, listening to the whimpering thing. She would get up and let her in and the cold stranger would creep into her bed, close under the covers, getting warm.

Mother said, "You are not in earnest about driving away that child. You love her."

"Don't you, Mother?"

Mother shivered. "She is like a child I knew once . . . that's why."

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* * *

The time came for a good little girl to be sent away to boarding-school to learn how to grow up politely, as all the other good little girls were learning. That was a lovely school filled with the nicest sort of little girls. At boarding-school the daughter was happier than she had ever been except when the longing came upon her for the ease and warmth of home. At such times she wanted Mother and she wanted her old familiar friend and enemy. She was haunted by the hoarse whispering voice, the thick arms and the queer deep-earthy smell. There was a freedom in being with the queer and secret companion not to be found with anyone else in the whole world. . . . *She* was never afraid. The nice girls were afraid, so were the teachers; they were all pretending that the world was pretty, that children, especially young girls, were very pretty and that womanhood was the prettiest thing of all.

In the middle of the winter, her room-mate fell sick and had to be taken to the infirmary. She missed her dreadfully. There was no one to whisper to after the lights went out. One night, she noticed in her room an earthy smell. She sat up in bed and whispered. Yes, the strange old companion had come. She crept into bed and they went to sleep after a long while in each other's arms.

That newcomer was a terrible danger and an agonizing secret. She kept her hidden away out of sight of teachers and girls. But after a long while she let her best school-friend into the secret. Next, the best friend told a chum. Soon there were about a dozen girls who knew. They would come to her room for secret meetings when, all in the dark, that girl would entertain them. It was exciting. She had the girls quivering, tittering, blushing, thrilled, ashamed. They called these secret meetings, "Ghastly Evenings." The hoarse whisper would tell about the Bloody Murderers and the Grim Gray Ghosts, would describe dreadful tortures of beautiful young men in dungeons miles down under the earth, where rats scuttled and long-legged insects lived. One of the very little girls began to have nightmares. That amused all the others because they had awful dreams too, but being almost as brave as the inventor of the horrible stories, they did not cry out or wake the teachers.

Dolly's nightmares grew worse and worse and at last the little girl had hysterics in the daytime and was sent home. Later came a letter from Dolly's mamma.

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The head teacher called for a certain pupil.

"You are one of our nicest girls," she said, "and I can find no fault with you at all. But Dolly has told her mother that there is a girl at school who has been talking to some of you about dreadful things. Dolly says that . . . *you* will know. Now, I have no complaint to make of you. Your deportment has been excellent, so has your scholastic record. The nicest pupils seem to like you, to choose you for a friend. But I must get to the bottom of this. Please tell me, if you can, what Dolly means."

She cried and cried. She didn't say a word about that hidden comrade of hers. She just cried and cried. The teacher was grave and kind. She sent the sobbing girl to her room to think it all over and to pray. There, instead of praying, she wrote to Mother and asked to be taken away.

She gave no reason. She just wrote a letter blistered with tears and begged and prayed Mother to take her home . . . before it was too late.

The head teacher said, "I am glad that your mother is taking you away, for I feel that in some mysterious fashion, you have been a bad influence in the school. And yet I can find no fault with you. You are so pretty and so gentle and so good." And she cried and kissed the young girl, stroking her long sleek golden hair.

"COMING OUT" was the most exciting thing that had ever happened. It meant lovely dresses, dancing, theaters, flowers, competitive girl-friends and young men. She forgot all about that other girl. She was too gay, too busy, and too tired to listen to hoarse whisperings. All the ugly facts were forgotten. There was so much music, such splendid intimate dancing. The young men's bodies were clean and strong, they made her feel clean and strong and quick with bright warm blood. And the music set to its deep pulse-rhythms all that she had really enjoyed of that companion's courage and release from care. It was blessed freedom to be frank and brave, to feel that if life could not be pretty it could be splendid, eager, noisy, real. Physical weariness was better than anything she had yet tasted, it freed her from other preoccupations. Weariness that came from loud laughter, from meaningless shouting, from interminable throbbing of drums and feet, freed her mysteriously from shame, uncleanness, and from fear.

And yet, Mother had never seemed so far away. Mother did not understand the splendid fierce release. She had understood the other trouble,

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had liked whipping that child and starving her and locking her up. She had liked the shedding of sorrowful, anxious tears on her own little daughter's bright soft hair. But by the dancing and the music and the loud staccato talk Mother was frightened. Something might happen to her child.

When she cut off that lovely shining hair, Mother sobbed, "My baby is gone. My sweet baby is dead," but the young girl stretched up her long white arms and stretched out her long slim body, hard and supple from laughter and dancing and speeding about day and night, and felt that the long hair had been a weight and a curtain and that for lack of it her neck was clean and her head proud. That other One was gone, lost . . . dead. She laughed to think of her. But Mother missed that Trouble . . . it had been exciting, terrible, a cause for darling tears.

There was a boy with gray eyes whom she loved. He was an absurd and laugh-provoking boy, a young golliwog with a weird loose-hung beautiful body and a beautiful voice and with a gift for the mimicry of every solemn and portentous grimace in the world. He loved her body and he told her so.

"It fits," he said, "but I haven't the money to buy it from you. Have you any money?"

She had no money. Mother told her she could have none for years and years and years. She must marry a man who was able to stand on his own feet and to make his way in the world. The boy's father, who did have money, said, "Boy must begin at the bottom of the ladder just as I did. He can't afford to marry for years and years."

The boy kissed her, when she cried. She loved him and he loved her. They told the world. Her mother said, "Wait." The boy's father said, "Wait."

They waited and they danced and their passion presently turned to quarreling and tears and hate. They knew what would cure his nervous quarreling but they were afraid.

It was then that the other girl came back.

Rather than let the boy meet with this creature, she told him never to see her again. He said, "Right," and walked away from her. He went all the way down the hall to the front door. She stood between the curtains of the drawing room. His moving feet pulled tight cords on her heart.

"You are a damn fool," said that other girl, roughly, loudly.

To hide the slattern with her bold eyes, her rough hair, and her thick red mouth, the sleek and golden daughter of the house drew the two curtains all about her.

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But the boy whirled like a top.

"By God! You've said it! That's the girl I want."

He came back and tore her from the curtains. There she stood, that other girl, laughing like a fish-wife.

But the shamed child who loved him ran away and hid. And she would never see the gray-eyed boy again. He did not want to come back after that night. He had been frightened and disgusted. He had liked more than anything else the cleanness that was hers. It was the cleanness and the strength of her beautiful body that had made it "fit."

Then the right man came along.

She knew at once that he was the right man because he matched with all the Pretty Things, with guardian angels and the Big Kind Man with Wings. Mother was so pleased with him. He was thirty-seven years old — seventeen years older than she was — and when she was with him it was like being with the memory of her father, tender and kind, stolen from that first right in him which Mother had had, and this made her heart beat with a secret triumph. And he was handsome in a close-knit, level way, strong without any of the boy's weird suppleness. Oh, how hard she tried to please this older man! She had never taken so much trouble. She would watch his face for every brightness of approval, for every shadow of distaste. She studied to be the Ideal Woman. He was very strong in his disapproval of the modern girl. She tried not to be a modern girl. She tried to wear the dresses he approved, the colors he preferred. She would not smoke cigarettes, nor drink cocktails. She danced a foot away from every partner. She would not flirt, nor "pet," nor stay out late.

Mother and she drew very close together again. The girl that this man loved and Mother's precious girl were so alike. It was a going back to the old days when Mother and she had had so many good crying times together, when they had tried to drive the other girl away. This older man even wanted her to grow sleek bright hair. "You are really an old-fashioned little girl. You have an old-fashioned little face," he said, "a sweet, old-fashioned, rosebud girl, that's what you are and how I love you for it!"

When this older man kissed her, she felt small and shy and flattered. She didn't want to kiss back. She wanted to be kissed and petted tenderly.

This man had two fortunes, one that he had inherited from his grandfather and one that he had made himself in the Tea and Coffee business.

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So nobody said, "Wait." They were soon engaged to be married and she wore a great blue sapphire. The ring seemed as heavy as an iron belt. Asleep she dreamed that it was welded about her hips and woke up screaming. But she was proud of the big heavy ring on her thin brown finger.

The other girl said, creeping in under the covers, "When you marry this man, I'm coming to live with you."

She began to be terribly unhappy. Would her fiancé be willing to marry her if he knew that another woman must come to live with them? Night after night the poor girl lay awake trying to persuade the companion of whom she was ashamed to let her go alone and free into the new life. But that one, unashamed, just held her tightly with her thick hard arms and laughed.

The next afternoon, sitting beside her lover on the drawing-room sofa, she told him all about her foster sister, all that she could remember from the first remembered meeting.

And this wise, brave man drew the trembling confessor into his arms — thick and strong they felt, like another pair — and kissed her shining head.

"As if I couldn't take care of the two of you? We'll tame that naughty girl. I'm strong enough to keep her in her place. She shall come and live with me in my house and if she doesn't learn to be a little lady, I'll beat the life out of her, eh? Shall I?"

"Oh, how I wish you would!" But, in her heart she knew that the "naughty girl" was very strong, stronger than this man, much too strong for him.

When she came to live with them after they were married the other girl filled the master of the house with loathing. But his eyes glistened as he watched her.

"This is not a nice woman," he would say. "This is not an old-fashioned rosebud girl at all. But neither is she the Modern Girl. I don't know where she came from. She reminds me of things I have read. I think there is something about her in the Bible. A strange woman . . . a strange woman. How coarse she is! She makes me shudder. I am ill for looking at her." But all the while, his eyes glistened as he talked of her.

He tried to change and to subdue her. This, indeed, became the great preoccupation of his life. And it increased her sense of importance. She

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pretended to begin to reform, pretended to be more like the sweet girl that this man loved. She stole the bridal clothes and changed them daringly, used powder and paint and perfume above her uncleanliness and stuck false, gilded flowers in her wild hair.

Now, the young wife began to hate this companion with bitterness and fear. Because, while he was trying to reform her, the man she married was not the man she loved. He lost his tenderness, his gentle, reverent ways. She could not love the grim, fierce tyrant with glittering eyes who thought that he was more than a match for any woman.

Sometimes, it is true, he would admit uneasiness. "This woman is very strong," he would say, "but," pulling all his muscles tight in the hands of his masculine will, "we will get the best of her, my poor sweet love."

At such moments, of doubt and of dependence, his wife loved him again with a deep, new love, warmer and more embracing than any emotion she had ever felt in all her life. Under its influence he would really ignore the other woman. But, after she had cried for nights and days, neglected and alone, the husband would give heed to her again. He would be sure of his strength. He would begin to laugh at his own humility. After such discipline the woman would be very cunning. She had wiles and ways. And the husband, though he dared not admit it, was wild with a queer, fevered delight, to be again in conflict.

So, pretending to be the slave of this man, pretending that soon, very soon he would be altogether master, the woman began more openly to exercise her power. She actually began to appear before some of their friends, entertained them, scared and obsessed them with her terrible unmasculine, unfeminine freedom from care and fear. Just as she had got around Mother and the nice girls at school, so now she began to get around their friends. "I-don't-care . . . don't-care . . . don't-care. . . ." Like a worm in the earth she wriggled about their drawing room, not caring. Laughing at laws and fears; at pretty stories and at God. At first she would laugh up her sleeve but later when everyone was used to her boldness, she began to laugh more openly. Then the friends grew bolder too. They always said that they came to the house to see its gentle mistress, but their mood was like her husband's or her own at school. The women admired that creature for her courage and the men were obsessed by their desire to overcome her. They wanted to get the best of her, to be her master. And this they could not do because they were afraid. The woman

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was so much stronger than they were. She captured them because they were excited by her "don't care . . . don't care" which beat with the rhythm of a drum in all her words, her movements and her pulses.

Now, when the thick strong arms of her old companion were flung about her neck, the poor girl would weep helplessly and tremble. That deep-earthy smell was like the odor of a grave.

She had a child. At the first cry of that weak life, the outside fled away, stopping up her ears as though, at last, she were afraid.

Such happiness came into the clean free house. The father was radiant. He looked like a young knight. He was proud and sweet. He was gay and tender. He would kneel beside her bed and play with his daughter's tiny, dampish fingers.

They felt that their happiness was safe forever.

Gradually they grew accustomed to their fatherhood and motherhood and the baby ceased to be a miracle. But its care became more and more absorbing of attention. Day and night, the mother could think only of her baby: its health and cleanliness, its charming sleep and its entrancing wakefulness. She talked to her husband of nothing else. The rest of her life was just a vague sort of interruption, something that kept her away from Baby, a troublesome fog through which she felt her path back as soon as might be to her child.

It did not occur to her that her husband could not share this profound preoccupation, that he might feel neglected and alone. He was still very tender and kind. But he began to be restless, active, gay. He wanted to go out, to play with his old friends, to make new friends. He wanted "parties," to go to them, to give them. She was dreadfully bothered and bored. She was far too much interested in the baby to care for other people, far too tired and too tied-down by hours of feeding, waking, sleeping, to want to go to parties. So, after a fretful while, during which he coaxed and grumbled, he began to go about alone.

For a time the young wife was relieved, then she began to be alarmed. He was so rarely at home and when he was there he was preoccupied, gently indulgent to her and to the baby but always humming or whistling dance-tunes, song-tunes, under his breath.

"This is the way husbands are lost," she said to her own mind, "but what am I to do? Baby is so important and so exciting. I wish there were two of me, one to care happily for Baby and one to entertain and interest

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my husband, make him want to come home and to stay home, make him afraid to run away." And, for the first time in more than a year, she thought of someone else . . . someone who had gone away in dread of motherhood.

She was alone in the house that night and Baby was asleep. From some other house a short distance away, there came the sound of jungle music, monotonous as heart-beats. It was a sultry, heavy night. Once in a while, a gusty, tired wind leaped up and fell again . . . earth-bound.

She opened her door and stepped out into the soft thickness of the garden. There was not a star. The night was even, black and dense against her face. It might have been a vast piece of rich cloth; it might have been the black, thick breast of a colored Mammy. She felt that she could have pushed it away with her hands. The music sounded louder, nearer, but, except when the wind bounded up wearily and dropped, there was no other sound at all.

She moved a few steps forward through the dark, which seemed to move too with her to give her space and breath. She waited, trying to think. It would be easier to call back this old familiar than to neglect the baby and to run about to parties and to give parties with her husband . . . easier, less fatiguing, less of a strain. She could stay at home and her husband would stay at home too. She knew that he would be excited by the return of his rebel and his temptress. He wanted her back — secretly, perhaps. Maybe it was in search of her that he ran about from one party to another.

She raised her voice as the wind lifted itself languidly and the trees sighed just once.

She called the name fearfully, for it was a fearful name.

No one answered. No one came. She felt suddenly very lonely and very much afraid. She ran back into the house and locked the glass door.

She turned on all the lights and sat down to play on the piano. She could not drown that other music, playing louder as though the orchestra had come out upon the terrace.

There came the sound of a slow footstep out there in the throbbing dark.

Up she jumped, her heart shaking, unlocked the door and let the wind flow past her, warm and wild and deep-earthy into the empty room.

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* * *

THE MASTER of that house was not glad to see the woman who returned. He was angry and alarmed. Besides, she had changed. She was dull and sullen. A certain bitter quality had entered into her carelessness so that she was less unselfconscious, less alive. But she had all her terrible freedom from fear, her don't-care, don't-care. It was less wild, to be sure, less childish and more dangerous. She was less unclean, not quite so deep-earthy. She had the dull, dazed look of someone who has slept the clock around in a dark place and is not yet awake.

Nevertheless, though he resented her return and gave her a sour contemptuous greeting, it was easy to see that he was interested, even flattered. He did not guess that she had been deliberately called back for his detention. He fancied that the strange bold creature had returned of her own accord because of the lure of his masterfulness, his power over her dreadful strength.

Now, for a while he *was* her master. He could do with her just what he wanted. He could humiliate her at will. She dressed as he commanded, danced and sang, played or was silent at his wish.

And, though the mother loathed what she saw and could not love the man in his role of master, she was pleased with the success of her plan. For her husband soon lost interest in parties and stayed in his own home, to finish forever with the taming of that woman who had come back.

Little by little, she showed her old vigor. Little by little, she asserted her freedom from love and fear. She mocked her master's God and wriggling about his hearth like a snake she flickered her tongue across the faces of his household idols.

He began to realize that she was not tamed after all, this mocking helot, and he was very angry, very cruel. And more and more enslaved.

She was now the gay and restless one. She insisted upon seeing and entertaining friends. The man had begun to bore her. The house was filled with feverish noise and laughter. It seemed as though its master were afraid to do anything to displease the woman.

His wife stopped her ears. She tried to ignore and to forget. But the tumult, with the contempt and secret anger that it caused her, made her unable to sleep or to care properly for the child. So the child fell sick.

She nursed it day and night and then, the baby being better, she was terribly, terribly tired.

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In all her life she had never been so tired. It was like a loosening of the bonds of life. There was no courage in her and no looking forward. It was a longing to be done with the effort that is called life.

Even the baby had ceased to interest her. She was tired of the baby because, more than anything else, it was her life.

The other woman was giving a party. The guests were about to arrive. In one of those borrowed dresses, cut low in the back so that she could struggle into it, she moved about the upstairs rooms singing, hoarse and deep, below her breath. Her massive hips looked as though they would burst through the satin dress below the dreadful suppleness of her long waist. The upper part of her body swayed like the stalk of a tall swamp flower, but below, her body was a root. She seemed to pull it up with an effort when she moved: lightly swaying above, plunging and swinging heavily below, this body in motion had the rhythm of quick notes and of slow — two contrary rhythms yoked together, fascinating, bewildering to watch. One listened to her as she moved.

The mother dropped near her sleeping baby's crib, so heavy were her eyes that the baby's face was in a mist. It would be impossible to keep awake and give the little one her midnight medicine. The other woman must do it, must come up from the party . . . must remember . . . ten drops in water, ten drops in water. . . . She must not forget.

So that weary mother went as far away from life as possible and fell down there and shut out the sound of throbbing music, of loud laughter and of gritting, pounding feet, the sound of Baby's fretting and wailing, the sound of life. It was not sleep that came to her that night. It was a long swoon, a complete oblivion.

And the music lasted, beat on, the feet shook the house, made its floors vibrate and its walls tremble, as though it had come to life, had pulses, veins or climbing sap, as though it were growing in a jungle and moved to the passing by of beast pads in a tropic night.

The woman drank to encourage her guests, to free the man and his friends from fear. To-night no one must be afraid. Everyone must laugh as she laughed, must shout and mock. They must forget God and Death and Pretty Things. Life must be what she knew it was: a dirty, splendid, careless, aimless, deathless worm, something that was untroubled by the distance between the stars.

Above the perfume of flowers, the aroma of wine, the pungency of

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smoke, the house was filled with the deep-earthy odor of her courage.

At midnight this woman came into the nursery. She flapped to and fro like a bat in the nursery. When she took the little medicine bottle, she lifted it as though it had been a flagon filled with molten lead. And she poured out the medicine into a glass, counting, "one-two-three" but not dropping, pouring all the while. She forced the pungent dose down the baby's throat. It choked at first, then began to moan.

Back the woman went again to her party. She napped and bounded down the wide, polished stairs, singing her song.

The party lasted until broad day. Sun came in at the eastern windows. The servants were scared by what they saw.

It was the cessation of all noise that woke the baby's mother. She felt very clear in her head and dry and light. Her first thought was for her little girl and she sped back to the nursery along the halls and down the stairs.

The baby lay in its crib with the sun in its face. It was quite blue and very cold.

She screamed aloud, ran to the bottle and saw what had been done. She caught up the baby. It was not dead. Its tiny heart moved weakly at long intervals and its breath fluttered, paused, fluttered again just like an insect that will die.

Holding the fragile thing to her breast, she flew down the stairs, calling for her husband. Through the torn and distracted rooms she went, calling, seeking. Everywhere lay shattered glass, scattered flowers, broken food, and spilled wine. A guest lay asleep, half on a sofa, half on the floor. Delicate chairs had been overturned. A tall clock had been pulled out into the middle of the room and some woman had tied her girdle about it and stuck a man's hat over its blank face. It was still talking its solemn nonsense: TICK TACK. It was a Grandfather's Clock.

The baby's father, asleep among some cushions on a couch, woke to the sound of her keening, to her icy grasp.

Slowly he understood: the baby was dying, dying. It had been given an overdose of the doctor's powerful drug. Send for that doctor quickly, quickly, she cried, using all the names she had for their old tenderness, calling him her lover, her husband, Baby's father! Send for that doctor, please.

They rang and rang at the telephone and at last the doctor came.

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The father, bluish-white, dishevelled in his dress-clothes, the mother waxen pale in her blue wrapper and her hanging, golden hair, waited upon his verdict.

"She may live. She may. There's a specialist. . . ."

"For God's love, where is the specialist?"

The specialist was not very close at hand but the father set out at once to get him. He would go by airplane and by airplane they would come back, the specialist and he. They would be back before sunset.

"You won't be in time, I fear," the doctor whispered to him. "But it is better to travel than to wait, it is better to try than to give up. That is why I told you about this man. I'll stay with your poor wife and do what can be done. The man has a new way."

The servants set the house in order. They whispered about these people and their friends all day as they set the house in order and ran about getting little things for the doctor and for their mistress.

The baby lived, the baby still lived. The doctor would not let her die. He sat there beside the crib, not letting her die, pushing away Death with his clever hands. "I wish that man would come," he said at twilight. "I want you to leave the nursery now, you tired mother, and go away somewhere. I will call you if . . . I must."

She went away.

She went downstairs in the twilight and lifted the rug from that other woman, where she lay, still deep in drunken slumber, flushed and limp. The mother said, "You are a murderess. I condemn you. I sentence you. I will execute you before my husband comes back."

She brought down a narcotic from the medicine closet in her husband's bathroom.

"You gave my baby an overdose," said the mother sternly. "Now let us see what an overdose will do for you. You are trying to wake up. I see you twitching. Your heavy hands are awake. You shall not open your eyes again. You shall never again see my husband nor my child."

She poured out the drug. She poured the narcotic down the gullet of the woman. And the thick hand stopped moving, the flush faded, there was no twitching at the coat-sleeve of consciousness.

When that body was deeply, deeply drugged, she took it by the shoulders and dragged it out of the house.

It was almost night already. Fireflies came in and out silently at dif-

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ferent levels in the still tall air. She dragged the unconscious body across the flower-beds and the turf and along the paths to the farthest corner of the garden behind some bushes under the brick wall. And there she dug a deep grave. For hours she dug, patiently, strongly, dug the deepest grave ever dug by a woman for the body of a woman. And into it she rolled that body. It fell and turned over with its face in the damp earth. And she buried it alive.

She tramped down the dirt and trampled down the sod until it fitted tight and smooth above the drugged and smothered woman.

"I know you are not dead," said the woman who stood above and saw that there were little white stars now in the garden. "I know that you are not dead. But you are buried under the earth and the earth is the only thing as heavy and as strong as you are. If you climb up out of the earth again you must be weak and changed."

She went back into the house.

The specialist had come and was working over the baby. They would not let her come into the room.

She went to her bed and lay under the sheet, wet and shivering. All night she was not called. She lay awake, shivering and wet.

She found that she thought long, long thoughts about a strange bold child who years ago had crawled into her garden by the dry ditch beneath the wall. Was she sorry for that creature whom she had buried alive? Had she ever loved her at all? Before hate began, had she loved that companion of her guilty loneliness a little? Could she have loved her more?

Too late. Too late now, she told her shivering heart. That girl is buried in the garden, she cannot breathe. Her mouth is in the earth. She has gone back to the earth. Too late to laugh, too late to love, too late to understand. But . . . how strong she had been! How brave!

Her husband came and stood beside her. He was pale, ashamed, exalted. There were tears upon him.

"The baby is alive . . . will live," he said.

He wept with his head upon his wife's sick breast.

He never asked a single question about the other woman. At first he did not even seem to notice that she was no longer there. But, after a time, he began to look furtively about the house, as though he had lost something. His wife smiled to her own heart. Let him look. Oh, let him look.

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He saw her smile and his eyes were hurt and secretive and frightened, but he could not help looking for what was lost.

He went out into the garden. Every night when the dark stood up amongst the trees and the wind blew and he heard the jungle music from the Inn, he would go as though absently into the garden and she would hear him wandering about, looking for someone. She would then play the piano loudly, scornfully, in triumph. She knew that he would never find the other woman. Sometimes when he thought the trees were loud enough in the wind to cover the sound of his voice, he called softly. He called a name. His voice was fearful and full of pain. She played louder than the trees were roaring to drown her husband's troubled, calling voice.

Then he began to search in the lanes and in the town. If he saw someone that looked a little like that woman he would follow her home and question her. His wife did not care. She knew that he could never find what he looked for and that he could never be satisfied. He might fancy a resemblance but that would only sharpen his longing for the original, his longing and his fear. So she was serene and cool and patient. Some day he would be tired of searching. He would give up.

But he began to travel through the world. He went on business trips to distant countries and he was sad to go. He would kiss his wife and his daughter tenderly. She knew that he was still looking, still searching for what was lost.

When he came home he would be kind and gentle. She loved him faithfully and sadly. She was satisfied because she had buried that woman so deeply in the earth. She found life tranquil, serene, and she was more and more absorbed in the health and joy of the little growing girl, soothed by the intermittent presence of the man she loved. It was enough for her now that he was a kind father and a tender husband . . . when he was home. Let him search the whole world over until he should be tired. She would not let her heart be troubled by that long, vain, secret search.

She was happiest when she sat in her window and watched the child playing in the garden. How pretty and graceful the little creature was with her light limbs and spreading, flying hair! It was beautiful to see her dance and run, singing high, singing low, and hiding from Mother, to jump out with a Boo and a cataract of mirth.

One afternoon, the mother had gone out upon an errand and came in late. Her arms were hungry for the child. She ran up to the nursery. It

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was empty. The house was all empty and out in the garden it was already dusk. The wind was blowing a little now and then. She went to the door which opened from the drawing room to the garden and called . . . "My Pet! My Pet!"

The child came running like a little hungry dog, threw herself bodily against her mother, hugged her close, close, close, kissed her as though she would never be done.

"My mummy. My pretty Mum. I'm so glad that you are home."

And the mother, holding her off a little, looked down and saw a tiny smear of blood on the child's rosy face.

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In which a classic and much loved fantasy theme is brought amusingly up to date . . .

The Three Wishes

By John Morressy

AN OLD SOLDIER was walking in the forest, feeling very sad. He had been a soldier ever since he was a boy, and had served his prince well. He would have been happy to remain a loyal and faithful soldier to the end of his days. But a new prince wanted only young soldiers in his service. So the old soldier was given one month's pay and one week's rations and a letter of commendation, and was turned out of the army.

Now the rations were gone, and the pay was gone, and the letter, which he had tucked in his boot to cover a hole, was almost gone. The old soldier began to think that he, too, would soon be gone. He sat in the shade at the foot of a broad oak, pulled off his boots, unfastened his tunic, and wondered what was to become of him.

As he wondered, he leaned back and closed his eyes, for in his years of soldiering, he had learned to make proper use of every opportunity to rest. When he heard a soft scrabbling noise close by, he opened one eye nar-

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rowly to see what was causing it, but he did not move otherwise. To his surprise, he saw a little man, no bigger than a kitten, examining his boot. Casting one furtive glance around, the little man dropped to his knees and crawled in.

Quick as thought, the old soldier reached into the boot and caught the little man by one leg. He pulled him out of the boot and gripped him firmly with both hands.

"Well now, what have we here?" he said.

"Let me go! It's all a mistake!" the little man cried, wriggling and kicking.

"It's always a mistake to climb into a stranger's boot."

"I thought it was a tunnel!"

"How could you mistake a boot for a tunnel?"

"Well then . . . I thought it was an abandoned boot!'

"Worse and worse," said the old soldier, shaking his head. "I think you were looking for a place to hide your gold."

"No, no! I have no more gold! The prince has confiscated all the gold in order to recruit young soldiers!" the little man protested.

The old soldier believed that. He was finding it easier and easier to believe unpleasant things about the new prince. "If you have no gold, then what else can you offer me to let you go?"

"I could repair your boots. They're in terrible shape."

"That's not much to give for your freedom."

"All right, I'll clean your clothes, too. How's that?"

"Still not enough. I'm out of work, out of money, and out of food. I need more than mended boots and clean clothes," said the old soldier.

"Do I look like a rich man? Be sensible. I made you a good offer."

"No. I want . . . I want three wishes!"

"Why didn't you say so before? It's a deal. Loosen your grip a little so I can get out the papers," the little man said.

"Papers?"

"You have to sign for the wishes. It's a protection for both of us. There have been misunderstandings in the past, charges of fraud, bad faith, a lot of unpleasantness. This way you'll sign, I'll sign, we'll have it witnessed — everything will be out in the open."

The old soldier relaxed his grip ever so slightly. The little man reached into his red-and-yellow jacket and drew out a tiny inkstand and a roll of

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papers the size of a mint leaf. He unrolled the papers, scanned them, then took the pen and signed. He held them out to the old soldier.

"Read them over and, if you're satisfied, sign at the bottom, next to my signature. Sign all four copies," the little man said.

"I can't read them. They're too small."

"I'll fix that." The little man took powder from a pouch at his belt and sprinkled papers and inkstand. In an instant they were human size.

The old soldier took his time reading the document, and when he was done, he was not entirely clear about every detail, but it appeared to grant him three wishes and contain no dangerous provisions. He signed, and at once the papers shrank to leaf size.

"Now we need a witness. It can't be a little man or a human. Conflict of interest, you understand. How about the Fairy of the Hill?" the little man asked.

"As long as she's nearby. I want to get this settled so I can start making wishes," said the old soldier.

"You could let me go now. You've got my signature. I can't run away."

That was welcome news, because the old soldier needed both hands to pull his boots on. As he took up the first boot, he asked, "Why did you crawl into my boot, anyway?"

"Curiosity. I wanted to read the paper stuck in the bottom."

"That's my letter of commendation," the old soldier said proudly. He pulled out the letter and unfolded it. "Here. Read it if you like."

When the old soldier had his boots on and his tunic fastened, the little man looked up respectfully from where he stood on the letter, just above the bold curlicues of the signature, and said, "That's impressive. Loyalty . . . dedication to the prince . . . courage in the face of the enemy . . . heroic disregard for personal safety. . . . Were you really that good?"

"Oh, I was a good soldier."

"Then why are you out of food, out of money, and out of work?"

The old soldier shook his head slowly, frowning in perplexity. "I haven't figured that out."

"Keep working on it. Look, would you mind if I ride on your shoulder? I'll never keep up with you otherwise."

The old soldier agreed. With the little man on his shoulder, he set out for the hill where, according to local legend, the fairy dwelt. It was a pleasant walk, since the little man was a talkative chap, and full of inter-

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esting and amusing anecdotes. His lively company helped the old soldier forget the grinding emptiness in his belly.

The little man had somehow signaled ahead, and the fairy was waiting for them. She was a beautiful creature, about the size of the little man, but very slender and cloaked in a golden haze.

"Will this take long?" she asked in a shimmering silvery voice.

"No time at all. I only want you to witness a Wish Grant. Standard form, no complications," said the little man, handing her the papers.

The fairy put on a tiny pair of spectacles and scanned the papers. She gave one little nod of satisfaction, signed all four copies, and handed them back. The little man gave one to the old soldier.

"Here's your copy," he said.

"Who gets the others?"

"I keep one, one goes to Wish Central, and one is filed at the palace."

"Did you give him the Request to Wish forms? He'll need them," the fairy said.

"No, he won't. Not under the standard grant agreement," the little man said.

"He will, too. Look at IV, B, 1, clause f."

Muttering under his breath, the little man studied the form. After a moment he looked up in chagrined surprise. "You're right. When did they change the forms? Why wasn't I notified?"

"It's been that way for ages," the fairy said.

"Well, I never heard about it. It's been a long time since I granted any wishes."

"Then do you know the updated postwish procedure? That's only about two hundred years old."

"What's that?" the little man asked in a pained voice.

"Within thirty days of the granting of a wish, the wisher has to submit a report on Form WF-10d. Six copies."

"Six?"

"One for the wisher's files, one for the granter's files, one to Wish Central, one to the palace, and two to the Director."

"The Director? What Director?"

"Don't you little men ever read memos? It's all centralized now, under a Director. The palace sends her a notice of every Wish Grant, and she's in total charge from that point on."

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The little man raised his hand. "Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. Before he can wish, he has to submit four copies of a Request to Wish form — is that right?"

"No, he needs nine copies of the Request to Wish. A copy goes to each member of the Wish Clearing Committee for approval. They report to the Director, and if she approves, seven copies of Form AW-6 are sent to the wisher. One is for his files, and the rest are attached to Form WF-10d."

"What's Form AW-6?" the little man asked.

"Authorization to wish. You can't have a wish granted without it," said the fairy.

The old soldier, who had been listening closely to their conversation, asked, "Will all this take long? I'm starving to death, and I want to wish for some food."

The fairy said, "It takes about six weeks to get the Request to Wish forms to you. They've got a big backlog at Wish Central."

The old soldier shuffled his feet uneasily. "I don't think I can last that long."

"Look, I'm really sorry about this," said the little man. "I thought we could take care of everything today, and you'd have your wishes by sundown. That's the way it used to work."

"Nothing works the way it used to since we got organized," said the fairy despondently.

"Is there anything we could do to hurry things up?" the little man asked her.

"You could appeal for an emergency wish."

"How long would that take?"

"About eight weeks."

The old soldier shook his head in wonderment. "It sounds just like the service," he said.

"I'm really very embarrassed by this," said the little man. "If I could scrape together a bag of gold, maybe we could work something out, but the prince has confiscated all our holdings."

"I'd let you have some fairy gold, but it wouldn't help. If you try to spend it, it turns to dry leaves," the fairy said.

"It's kind of you to offer," said the old soldier. "It looks as though I'll just have to starve to death. I had hoped to fall in battle, but I guess that's out of the question."

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"He's a great soldier. You should see his letter of commendation," said the little man to the fairy.

"What's a letter of commendation?" she asked.

"You can read it if you like," said the old soldier. He tugged off his boot, removed the letter, unfolded it, and spread it on the grass. Hovering over it with a soft hum of her wings, the fairy read it slowly. When she was through, she flew up and encircled his head, looking at him with new interest.

"That's wonderful! It's really absolutely wonderful!" she said in her lovely silvery voice. "Nobody ever says nice things like that about *us*. What a marvelous letter to have!"

"It's a little frayed," said the old soldier, embarrassed by her attention. "I've been using it to cover the hole in my boot."

"I'll touch it up for you. It's the least I can do for a loyal, brave, dedicated hero. I only wish I could ask you to stay to dinner, but all I've got in the house is an acorn shell of honey. That doesn't go far with someone your size."

"Why don't you shrink him?" the little man suggested.

"Shrink me?" the old soldier repeated, alarmed.

"Why not? You can have a good dinner, and you won't have to worry about starving — two or three berries and a few dewdrops a day will fill you."

"What a marvelous idea! Oh, let's do it!" exclaimed the fairy.

"Will I be able to grow again?"

"Whenever you like. I'll give you a magic word. Ready?"

The old soldier shut his eyes. "Ready," he said in a firm voice.

When he opened them again, he was eye-to-eye with the little man. The fairy alighted beside him, and she was just his size.

"I cleaned you up a little. You were looking shabby," she said.

He glanced down at his boots, now a sleek black, glistening with mirror-bright highlights. His tunic was as bright a red as on the day he had first donned it, and the fraying was gone from the cuffs. His buttons gleamed like the purest gold. His trousers were deep, unfaded blue, and a broad gold stripe ran down the seams. That was amazing enough for the old soldier, but there was more. On his shoulders were a general's epaulets, on his hat an admiral's crimson-and-gold cockade, and on his chest a triple row of medals, including the Order of the Emerald Rose, the highest decoration in the land.

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"If you're a hero, you should *look* like a hero," said the fairy, stepping back to admire her handiwork. She nodded with unconcealed pleasure, then said, "One more thing. Step to the side, please."

The old soldier notices that what he had thought was a worn and threadbare throw rug was actually his letter of commendation. When they had all stepped off it, the fairy gave it a tap with her wand, and it shrank to the proper size for the present company. It now appeared brand-new. The paper was uncreased, the ink midnight black, the seals gleaming.

"I put a special pocket in your tunic where you can keep the letter safe. You don't want to lose that," she said.

"Thank you. You're very kind."

"I've never met a hero before. All the people I meet want something. It's very boring to listen to them."

"That's nice work," said the little man. "He really looks important."

"He does, doesn't he?" said the fairy, pleased.

"More important than the Director, I'll bet. And anybody else at Wish Central. Or the palace, either. He's about the most important-looking person I've ever seen."

"Yes," said the fairy thoughtfully. She and the little man studied the resplendent old soldier — who now looked, and felt, like a seasoned field marshal. After a time they turned to one another and smiled, like two people who share a secret.

"It would work," said the little man.

"It couldn't fail," said the fairy.

"What?" the old soldier asked.

The fairy gave him a radiant smile. "Come and have dinner. Afterward we'll talk."

They dined, and they talked, and then they laughed with delight and talked some more. By sunset they had a plan to which all three contributed: the fairy provided a magnificent fairy coach, the little man his cunning, and the old soldier his memories of the ways of great commanders.

Early next morning the fairy coach, pennants flying, drew up before the largest building at Wish Central, the stronghold of the Director and her many assistants. A man in a splendid uniform of blue and gold emerged from the coach, followed by a little man in a red-and-yellow jacket. The uniformed man studied the building, scowled, shook his head, and said

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something to the little man, who at once made an entry in a notebook. The uniformed man then strode boldly to the door. The little man ran before him and hammered for entrance. The door swung slowly open, and the two doorkeepers peered out.

"Where is the reception committee? Where is the carpet? I've had to walk on bare ground, and then wait for the door to be opened!" the uniformed man roared at them.

"We were not told . . . ," one of the doorkeepers began.

"*Told!* Of course you were not told! This is a surprise inspection."

"But then, how . . . ?" the other doorkeeper started to ask, but fell silent under the terrifying glare of the uniformed man.

"Take me to the Director at once! At once, do you hear?!" the uniformed man demanded, his face growing as red as his tunic.

"Yes, sir," the doorkeeper said. "How shall we . . . how do you wish to be announced?"

The man in the red-and-yellow jacket snapped, "Don't you know the Grand Lord High Chief Overseer when you see him? Things must be even worse than we've heard they are." He made an entry in his notebook.

"No, no, we recognized — it was the light — the shadows — the dust — the surprise?" the doorkeepers babbled.

The little man looked from his notebook. "It won't be the first surprise today. Get moving!"

The Director was an elvish lady of formidable appearance. Like all elves, she was beautiful, and her beauty was of a chilly kind, like the moonlight on a glacier. She rose to greet her visitor, but she did not smile.

"The Grand Lord High Chief Overseer!" announced the doorkeepers.

She waved him to a chair. He sat stiffly erect, hands on his knees. His assistant stood beside him, notebook poised.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," the Director said coolly.

"I'm afraid there is no pleasure in it, Madam Director, no pleasure at all; certainly none for me, and I doubt that there will be any for you. This is a sad day for both of us, Madam Director," said the Overseer darkly.

"And why is that?" she asked, unfazed.

"Because, madam, I had hoped to be able to present you with a letter of commendation *from* the palace, and instead, madam, I am obliged to investigate your entire operation from top to bottom and submit a full report to the palace. There have been complaints about delays, discourtesy, im-

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proper procedure, malfeasance, misfeasance, and nonfeasance!" the Overseer thundered.

"I have heard no such complaints," said the Director.

"Of course not, madam — and there's the shame of it. Skulking and sneaking, that's what it is! Trickery and treachery! Root it out, I say, madam, and not a moment to waste! Why, we've been informed that there's a delay of . . . of. . . ." The Overseer hesitated. His assistant leaned closer and whispered to him, and he roared, "Six weeks in the distribution of Request to Wish forms! Six weeks, madam!"

"I'm sure that is an exaggeration."

"I hope so, madam. I sincerely hope so. Otherwise, it's the end of your letter of commendation. And what about the emergency wish requests? An eight-week wait at the very least! It's shocking, madam, that's what it is, shocking!" the Overseer bellowed, slapping a hand hard on his knee for emphasis.

"It will be looked into," said the Director.

"It will indeed, madam, and I will do the looking and this very day! This hour! This moment!" cried the Overseer, bounding to his feet. "And I sincerely hope that I find it all a base fabrication, a malicious slur by some disgruntled underlings. If not, madam, the letter of commendation will be replaced by. . . ." He paused and fixed her with a wild, glaring eye. His voice dropped to a reverberant growl as he uttered the words, "A letter of severe censure."

"It's a misunderstanding. All a misunderstanding," said the Director. A spot of color shone in each pale cheek. "Surely we can work it out without disturbing my entire staff."

"Too late for amicable resolutions, madam, much as I favor them. Things have gone too far. Your letter of commendation hangs in the balance."

"I do not like to appear ignorant, Overseer, but . . . exactly *what* is a letter of commendation?" she asked.

"Why, it's an official document expressing unstinting praise and profound gratitude, signed by the highest authority. It's something new. Yours would have been the first ever in the land of Faerie."

"Unstinting praise? Gratitude? I've never heard of such a thing. It would be so nice . . . lovely!"

"Allow me to show you my own letter, madam," said the Overseer

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proudly, reaching into a special pocket of his tunic. "It serves as the model."

She took the document, read it in silence, then looked at the Overseer in perplexity. "But if mine is to be . . . was to have been . . . might have been the first in the land of Faerie . . . ?"

"Mine was presented by a prince of the humans, madam," said the Overseer grandly.

Her eyebrows rose. Such an accolade was unprecedented. She reread the letter, and the further she went, the deeper the color in her cheeks became. When she was finished, she stood in silence for a moment, then she stamped her foot, waved her fists, and in a shrill voice cried, "I want a letter of commendation! I deserve one! The delays aren't my fault! They don't exist, they never existed, and if I'd known anyone was coming to check on me, I'd have corrected everything! It isn't fair! I want a letter like that one!"

"And I feel certain that you will have one, madam, believe me. I will make a painstaking investigation. I will examine all files, speak to everyone in Wish Central, and report my findings without fear or favor. So you have nothing to worry about, madam, nothing at all. Justice will prevail. The guilty will be punished!" said the Overseer stoutly, starting for the door.

"Wait!" the Director cried. "Surely if we can think of some quick and certain test, it would be to the benefit of all."

"Test? Did she say *test*?" the Overseer asked his assistant. "What can she be talking about? I'm not here to give *tests*!"

"It pains me, Overseer, to think of a hero, a courageous, dedicated, bold warrior, forced to spend his precious time and energy questioning clerks, examining records, checking figures, when he was born to action," said the Director.

Halting, the Overseer said wearily, "It is my duty, madam. I cannot shirk it, much as I would prefer the field of battle."

"But perhaps you can . . . *expedite* the task. Is that not possible?"

"It is desirable, madam. Highly desirable. But not, I think, possible." He gestured to his assistant, who grasped the door handle.

"Overseer, wait!" said the Director, approaching him and extending her hand as if to hold him back. "Is it not likely that your very presence here might overawe my people and cause them to behave in an unaccustomed

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manner, and thus bring about misleading results that would then render your report invalid, and unworthy of you?"

The Overseer pondered her words. He slowly turned, looked searchingly at her, and nodded profoundly. "You are astute, madam. Your reputation is well deserved, and I feel bound in honor to protect it by doing my duty, whatever the cost to me." He shook his head solemnly, said, "Would that there was a test that could free me from burden, madam, but I fear there is none."

His assistant whispered to him. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and then he whispered to the assistant. The little man leafed through his notebook and pointed out a certain entry to the Overseer. The Overseer rubbed his chin once again and began to pace the floor, frowning in deep concentration. Suddenly he slapped his hand against his thigh and snapped, "We will do it!" The little man drew a bundle of papers from the back of his notebook and gave them to the Overseer, who flourished them over his head. All the while the Director looked on, mystified.

"A test, madam!" said the Overseer.

"I am ready, Overseer," she said staunchly.

"These papers, entrusted to me by a little man when I told him I was on my way to Wish Central, will provide you with a chance to sweep away in a single stroke all allegations against you. If this request for three wishes can be processed and returned to the little man, accompanied by all required forms and signatures, by sundown this day, then it will be clear to me that any talk of delay, incompetence, procrastination, overstaffing, blundering, incivility, and abuse of a sacred trust is false and baseless. If, on the other hand, they cannot. . . ." The Overseer shrugged and said no more.

The Director held out her hand for the papers. "They can. They will."

And they were.

Things worked out to everyone's satisfaction. In due time the Director received a handsome document that praised her for a heroic spectrum of accomplishments. Many of them were imaginary; all were momentous. The language was vague but gaudy, the calligraphy elegant, the seal massive, the signatures flamboyant and, like the signatures of the truly great, illegible. She hung the letter of commendation on the wall of her office and pointed it out to every visitor.

The fairy was happy because she had helped deceive an uppity elf. Few

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things could have delighted her more. The little man was pleased at making sport of those who had embarrassed him before a human. Like all little men, he enjoyed getting his own back, especially on an elf.

The old soldier was happiest of all. He received his three wishes and employed them wisely and prudently. He lived to an astonishing age, in great comfort, at peace with everyone. To his very last day, he was willing to write a glowing letter of commendation to anyone — human, elf, or otherwise — who truly deserved it.

"Just have a seat over there with the others, Mr. Willard. Our computer is down."

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Ray Aldridge's last story here was "Hyena Eyes," (June 1990). His new story is a compelling and frightening extrapolation of the war against drugs, which is apparently "won," only to open a new can of worms . . .

We Were Butterflies

By Ray Aldridge

BY THE SECOND day of the sandstorm, Rob Owen was nearly dead. The old man had the lungrot, from breathing the chalky radioactive dust of the phosphate pits. We were locked in our hut until the storm broke, so I couldn't fetch the camp medics. It didn't matter; they would only have put him to sleep.

A coughing fit occupied him for a while. The deep bubbling sounds he made scared me. I was twenty years younger than Owens, but almost as sick; how long before I started to drown in my own disintegrating body?

He caught his breath, finally. "You know, John, we weren't all monsters. You'd be surprised; sometimes you couldn't tell us from real people."

"Oh?" I wiped the sweat from his face.

"Thank you," he said. "You've been kind."

"It's nothing," I said.

"No, no, it means a lot." He struggled to speak. "Did I ever tell you

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about the time my first wife and I went to see the Battery Man?"

"It was in Denver, you know . . . used to be a nice place to live, before the the Big Dry — something fresh and, oh, *adventurous* aboutplace . . . you had the feeling that anything might be possible. Or maybe it was just that I was young. . . .

"Anyway, I had a friend . . . sort of a skinny little sad sack, really, with bad skin and a squeaky voice and delusions of popularity . . . but Robert had good connections, which he'd go to anytime I asked him.

"Robert told us stories about the Battery Man — he was supposed to be the biggest acid wholesaler in Denver. 'Wanna meet him?' Robert asked one night. 'He's a heavy dude.'

"Mandy — that was my first wife — she was a little reluctant. It's funny: she'd swallow or smoke or snort just about anything, but she wasn't physically brave. Once when we went camping in the desert, I saw a rattler in the middle of an arroyo. I watched it from a safe distance for a bit. Really, it seemed like an interesting critter; of course I was high. . . . And all the time I stood there — and I was a good ten feet from the snake — Mandy screamed her lungs out."

Owen stopped, coughed, spat something brown on the floor, smiled a thin, crooked smile. "Figuratively speaking," he added wryly, and then went on.

"In those days, people got their dope from their friends, so I'd never met a big-time dealer. They were almost legendary, especially the ones who dealt acid, just a step below the ones who *made* acid, which is to say just two steps below God.

"Eventually we all piled into my old truck and went over to a semi-seedy neighborhood behind the stockyards.

"The house looked like a shack, one of half a dozen tiny places clustered at the end of a dark road. Maybe they'd been little tourist cottages a long time before. But inside, the place was real nice, with phony tapestries on the walls, and a lot of woody antiques.

"The Battery Man wasn't too pleased to see Robert, especially since Robert had been dumb enough to bring two strangers to his house. The Battery Man spoke to us in monosyllables: 'yeah, uh-huh, right.' He was small and wiry, with hooded eyes and a pointy black beard. Robert was visibly frightened, which didn't do much for my state of mind.

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"On the other hand, the Battery Man's girlfriend seemed pleasant; she was a tall, healthy blonde girl with big, perfect breasts, which showed through her blouse, especially when she moved in front of one of the candles that were everywhere. I was sorta caught between being scared of the Battery Man, and wanting to stare at his girlfriend's tits."

Owen paused, gasping. I tried without success to imagine him as a lusty young man.

He went on, in a thick, wheezy voice. "I guess part of the fascination was because Mandy was a little flat-chested. She had a great ass, round and ripe and smooth as a peach, but those bee-bite tits...." The old man trailed off, and I thought he might go to sleep, but after a minute he stirred, as if from a dream.

"Anyhow, we were getting more and more paranoid, when the girlfriend offered to make us some hot spiced cider. We all nodded, and I guess my eyes were big as pies. 'Come in the kitchen,' she said, and so I leaped up and trotted after her. My tongue was hanging out, probably. Mandy was right with me; she held my arm with both hands."

I stirred restlessly, and Owen looked up at me, a faint twinkle in those sunken eyes. "O.K., John, I'm getting to the point of the story pretty soon now. On that old white-enameled table was about half a bushel of speckled pumpkinseed acid, thousands of tabs, spilling out of a big plastic garbage bag. It looked like a sack of gold to us, and probably it was worth its weight in gold.

"The girlfriend seemed a bit worried all of sudden, like she just realized she was being too hospitable. Careless. I glanced at the Battery Man, and he'd gone a little stiff. I thought I could see evil thoughts behind his eyes. Mandy was squeezing my arm, more from fear than possessiveness now, and Robert looked pale under his blotches. Nobody said anything for a moment, then the Battery Man cleared his throat and suggested we go back in the living room until the cider was ready. 'Sure,' we all said, real quick. I could have sworn some dangerous message passed from The Battery Man to his girlfriend — and then she nodded.

"So we're back in the living room, sitting on the edges of our chairs, and no one's saying anything. The Battery Man's watching us like we're meat on a grill.

"The girlfriend calls, says, 'Help me with the cookie tray, would you, honey?'

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"While he's gone, I lean over and whisper in Mandy's ear, 'Don't drink the cider; don't eat the cookies.' She nods. Robert looks over at us like he's wondering what's going on, but I don't say a word to him. He got us into this; let him get dosed to death.

"But what happened, John? We *had* to eat the cookies, and we *had* to drink the cider, because both of them watched us like hawks. The cider was real good, with little curly sticks of cinnamon bark in the cup, and the cookies were homemade, butterscotch chip, I think.

"Our ears were buzzing with paranoia; I was almost dizzy, and I thought: *Whatever they've dosed us with is coming on.* But it was just panic, John."

Owen took my arm in a surprisingly strong grip and raised himself a little. "That's the point; that's the point. In one of those films you people were always making, what would have happened? Eh? We'd have ended up raped and mutilated and murdered. The cops would have found us wrapped in bloody sheets, our legs sticking out of a dumpster in some alley. Right? *Right?*"

He released me and fell back on the cot. "All that really happened was we went home full of cookies and cider." His voice was soft.

After a while his eyes closed, and he slept.

I thought about the old man's story. I remembered the beginning of the road I followed to this place.

I was sitting in front of the TV, watching the news. There was the usual story about the coming of the Big Dry, and then a story about Abdul Hamid, upscale crack dealer and AIDS vector. I watched cops in white contam suits bring him out of his penthouse. He was shirtless, muscular; he didn't look like a dying man. He seemed swollen with dark energy, as if he might burst his manacles and fly away. His large, beautiful eyes glittered. He grinned, showing strong white teeth.

The newshead's voice-over explained that Hamid had been arrested for crack distribution and felonious infection. He had admitted trading drugs for sex. A datebook contained the names of two hundred young women. Secondary infections were estimated in the thousands.

I looked at my daughter, who was in her playpen, playing with a string of big plastic beads, and a shudder of premonitory rage passed through me.

Then and there, I decided to accept the speech-writing job lately of-

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fered to me by Stewart Carl, who was running for Congress on a tough-on-drugs platform.

Hamid died before they could execute him, but he outlived many of his victims.

In the night, Owen woke, raving. He thrashed about with uncanny energy, flailing at unseen enemies. He called out to them in wordless, wheedling tones, as if begging for mercy. His ancient face looked like boiling oatmeal; his eyes were full of hopeless pleading. He didn't seem to see me.

After a while he fell silent, and his breathing steadied.

STEWART CARL relied on me to furnish him with words, because he had none of his own.

Stewart Carl is nothing, no matter how high he has risen. He had the right face, the right body language — he looked good on television, and that's why he's now acting chief executive of the United States. I suppose he'll hold that office for life. I can't imagine Stewart waking up one day and deciding that the Emergency is over.

He'll live a long time, I expect. He has no vices.

I remember — with bitter regret — the day the old fisherman tried to kill him.

Stewart was just a junior congressman then, in the middle of his first term. Some months before, he'd managed to coattail himself into minor prominence by being one of six coauthors of the Drug Offenders Financial Deterrent Act, which substantially broadened the federal government's powers of seizure.

Stewart and I were celebrating beside my desk. I held a fistful of congratulatory clippings. There was much praise for the boldness of the DOFDA, the timeliness of the DOFDA, the obvious necessity for the DOFDA. Related stories detailed the obscenely sybaritic life-styles of various bloated Colombian magnates. The reaction from Stewart's north Florida district was ecstatic: they hailed Stewart as a great statesman, battling the liberal bleederweeps for the hearts and minds of America's straying children.

I didn't yet have a full-time secretary, so the little man opened the door unannounced. He peeped diffidently into the room, saw Stewart raising a tumbler of champagne.

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"Mr. Carl?" he asked — though I'm sure he recognized Stewart.

Stewart frowned, lowered the champagne. "Ah . . . yes?"

The fisherman was dressed in an old-fashioned black suit, a little shiny at the knees and elbows, a suit he probably wore only to funerals. His face was full of that ruddy decay that comes from a life on the water.

As the old man came through the door, he straightened his arm, gave it a little shake, and a rod with a fat cylinder on one end dropped from his sleeve into his hand. He moved toward Stewart with a sort of glassy determination, obviously bent on murder. His weapon turned out to be a cut-down bangstick, a device used by divers to kill sharks — nothing but wood and high-density plastic, reloaded with ceramic shot, invisible to detectors.

Stewart made a bleating sound. As the old man approached, Stewart darted behind me. The fisherman tried to reach past me with the bangstick, but I slapped at it, knocked it away, and it detonated on the corner of my desk. A couple of pellets lodged in my calf; one hit Stewart in the foot.

I'll say this for Stewart: once the old man had taken his one shot, Stewart was a lion. He leaped over the desk and pummeled the old man to the floor, and then kicked him several times with his uninjured foot.

At the fisherman's trial, testimony was given that his deckhand had been caught in possession of marijuana. Under the "implied consent" provision of the DOFDA, even though the deckhand had never brought drugs aboard his employer's vessel, the court confiscated the old man's boat, ruling that he should have known that his employee was engaged in the sale and consumption of illegal drugs.

"It's not right," the old man had said. "It's not right to destroy a man for being stupid."

I attended the trial, as a witness for the prosecution. It was an unsettling experience. The old man spoke his piece with trembling dignity: Stewart was his congressman; he had not only promoted the law under which the boat had been taken, he had also refused to help, after the confiscation. What else could he do? the old man asked the jury, shrugging.

He was sentenced to death, as mandated under the new Violent Drug Offenders Act. When the sentence was read out, he stood with his head bowed, all the fight in him used up.

Stewart's well-publicized bravery in subduing this assassin took him

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to the Senate race three years later. The timing of the fisherman's execution — an excellent news peg arranged by Stewart's allies in the Federal Reformed Penal Division — helped put Stewart over the top.

Owen woke before dawn, lucid. His stirrings roused me soon after; I no longer sleep soundly.

His voice seemed clearer, and for a while I thought he might have recovered some strength.

"John," he said. "I'd appreciate a drink, if you'd be so kind."

I fetched a cup of rusty water.

He drank, spilling only a little. "That was good, John."

He settled back against the bundle of rags that served him for a pillow. "Will there be breakfast this morning, John?" he asked brightly.

I listened to the shriek of the sandstorm. "No, I don't think so." The guards don't make their rounds when the sand blows; it's too hard on their equipment.

"Ah." He didn't look very disappointed. "Well, too bad. I'll tell you another story, then, to pass the time till lunch."

"You've heard about Woodstock," he said, smiling toothlessly. "I know you have; all the old guys say they were there, except for you and me.

"Well, you know they weren't. But they saw the movie, and they think they know enough to pretend they were there, or else they wish they were there so much that they believe it now. I wasn't there; I was down in Mexico, trying to be a smuggler. But that's another story.

"When the *movie* came out, I was over in Vietnam, loading napalm on airplanes. I went to see it half a dozen times when it was playing at one of the Danang theaters. Awake or asleep, I dreamed about being back in the World. I'd be out on the flight line in that pounding sun, and I'd turn my cap around so that the bill hung down my neck. So my shadow would seem to have long hair, down past my shoulders. I'd look at that shadow and pretend to be someone else. Somewhere else.

"But this story isn't really about the movie, or about Vietnam, this story. Just a couple weeks before I got on the freedom bird, Jimi Hendrix died. I overheard a group of brothers talking about it; they were standing around smoking Kools laced with heroin and telling each other that it couldn't be true, that Hendrix couldn't be dead. Their voices had that

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poppy comfortableness; listening to them, I could almost believe it was just some publicity stunt.

"A month before, some kid I knew vaguely had bought a vial of 'liquid opium' — really just dregs — from one of the ARVN soldiers who hung around the barracks. He was showing it around in the chowhall that evening, proud as a peacock, and the next morning when his roommate came off-shift, the kid was dead in his bunk. Drowned in vomit, same as Hendrix."

The old man's wandering voice rose and fell, and he paused frequently to get his breath.

"Now, when I was back in the World, and out of the service and home visiting my folks, Woodstock came to the local drive-in. My little brother wanted to see it — my folks hadn't let him when it first came out. Well, I told my dad it was a great movie, and it wouldn't hurt Billy. I talked him into letting me take Billy to see it. At the last moment, my dad decided to go along, in case it turned out to be godless Commie propaganda or hard-core hippie porn, or something else that might warp little Billy's soft head.

"My dad enjoyed it, I think. Billy went to sleep in the backseat before it was over, but my dad was wide-eyed. He seemed real impressed by Hendrix, at the end, when Jimi played those vast, crashing chords. That unearthly power."

The old man shuddered, and his eyes gleamed with some long-ago pleasure. For an instant he looked a great deal younger, and I almost wished I could feel what he was feeling. He sighed, then went on with his story.

"'How's he making those sounds?' my dad asked.

"'Just the guitar.'

"'Jeez,' my dad said.

"'He's dead, you know,' I said, trying to continue the conversation.

"'How'd he die?'

"'O.D.'d. Got so blasted that when he threw up, he breathed it in and choked to death.'

"'Jeez.' My dad seemed horrified, as much by the loss of that great talent — because how could *anyone* listen to that music and not hear greatness? — as by the manner of his death. 'What a waste,' my dad said.

"Well, I was always argumentative. 'Yeah, I guess so,' I said. 'But live by the sword, die by the sword.'

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"'What the hell do you mean, Rob?' he said.

"'Jeez, Dad,' I said. 'I mean . . . *"Purple Haze"*; it's dope music. Do you think Hendrix could ever have played it that way if he'd never dropped acid? Sure, he'd still have been a good musician if he hadn't been a head, but it wouldn't have been the *same* music.'

"My Dad's eyes got funny, as if he were a little ashamed of me, and he said, 'Do you actually think it was worth it?' He looked away and didn't say anything else, and neither did I.

"But, John, it *was* worth it. I think back, to that little guy with the opium, who died for nothing — *that* was a worthless death. Hendrix got something from drugs: he got a whole body of magnificent work, work that would never have been if he'd been a good boy. Sure, he died a miserable death, and I wish he hadn't, but we're all dead in the long run."

His eyes bulged a little, strangely fervent, and a line of pink spittle ran down his chin. His chest heaved; his breath whistled. His lips took on a bluish tinge. I thought he might die right then, but he didn't.

"What's your point?" I finally asked, after he had recovered a little.

"My point is, my point is. . . . John, you and I, we're dying from drugs, too. I'm like Hendrix, a little. I got something out of it: a strange and wonderful life, very different from the one I might have led, if I'd been a little more like you. I have a thousand wonderful memories. . . .

"But you, John, what have you got? You're like the dopey little soldier boy, dying in his bunk before anything ever happened for him. I'm just saying it's not fair, for you. . . . The others here think you got what you deserved. But you didn't. I'm just saying I'm sad for you."

He looked at me with those fever-bright eyes, as if he really were sorry. After a bit his eyelids drooped, and he seemed to focus again on his own pain. He twisted slowly on his cot, groaning a little now and then. He was actually a very considerate roommate. Most of us go screaming and crying.

Finally he fell asleep.

I looked around the hut, my gaze sliding over the familiar decrepitude. The inner walls are cast foam, a scarred dun color; the roof is corrugated iron. In our eight-by-eight home are two bunks, two upright lockers, one chair. A ventilator sighs from the center of the ceiling, delivering somewhat cleaner, cooler air, which allows us to survive long enough to do useful work. The outer walls are steel, as is the door. A small television

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set hangs over the toilet. Odd that we are allowed this diversion — it doesn't seem to fit the death-camp aesthetic. I suppose it's an inexpensive way to keep us content in our dying.

Our one channel shows nothing but old movies of the most innocuous sort. I watched one about resistance fighters in the Philippines during the Second World War. The film stock had a thick amber cast, as though the story took place in some jungly golden fairyland. The sandstorm's roar made the dialogue inaudible, but I didn't turn it up.

In the movie, one of the guerrillas wore a black patch over his right eye, and I was struck by the potential awkwardness of it — he would be unable to aim his carbine from the conventional right-handed stance. . . .

But then a firefight ensued, and I saw him with the patch over his *left* eye, blazing away comfortably.

After the engagement he spoke angrily (by his expression) to the colonel. The patch had migrated back to the right.

In the next ambush, the patch again covered his left eye.

For a moment, just for a moment, I was absolutely sure that this was more than coincidence or ineptitude — that here was a *message* intended for me, though I couldn't read its meaning.

But there was no meaning, unless it's this: they are right about us. Our tainted minds are prey to dangerous fancies; we see meaning in empty things.

I shut my eyes tight. Slow tears seeped out. After a time I turned off the television and lay down to wait.

I WOKE FROM a dream of my former life. I remembered none of the details, just a sense of receding happiness.

My life was good in many ways. I had a beautiful and intelligent wife; she made a warm and comfortable home for us. My two daughters were charmingly precocious. As Senator Carl's chief aide, I had meaningful and responsible work.

Stewart was appointed to the Senate's New Approaches Committee, a congressional cannon aimed at the accelerating drug catastrophe. This problem provided a safe rallying point for ambitious politicians, and Stewart was fortunate enough to get in on the ground floor.

In that first year, Stewart, on my advice, got out into the field and made himself visible. We alternated between Capital Hill and the darkest battle-

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fields we could find. We went on "fact-finding expeditions," behind the cameras of half a dozen of the hottest Geraldos in the business.

In Tampa we went into a crack house and found a freezer full of bodies. At some point the pusher had strangled his common-law wife and two little boys and folded them carefully to fit. The strangest thing, to most of the viewers who saw the segment on prime time, was that the man kept his stash hidden under the bodies, as if he had expected it to be safer there than under the frozen broccoli or the fish sticks. We got good footage of Stewart, handsome face pale, looking down into that icy tangle of blue-black limbs, wearing an expression of unbelieving horror. For all I know, his emotion was genuine; with Stewart, you could never be sure.

In Seattle we were in on the arrest of a woman who had set up a snuff palace, where the wealthy and badly bent could go to get high and kill someone. Most of the victims were Central American illegals, bought from a nearby sanctuary church. I won't remember the things I saw in that place.

In the South Bronx, a mass grave, full of one cowboy's business rivals.

In Detroit a downtown cult, where the sacraments were heroin and human blood.

Stewart was there. We got good footage. His influence grew daily, and he was credited with devising many effective new tactics in what came to be called the Good War. The list of his achievements is really mine; Stewart never had an original idea in his life.

We authored the Constitutional Exception Act, which allowed more expeditious investigations and prosecution of drug offenders, and which worked exceptionally well. Soon the prisons were bulging. That led to the Private Incarceration legislation, which took advantage of newly developed technology. Offenders were collared with explosive radio beacons and constrained to rented housing for the duration of their sentence. If they could make a living at home, or if they had friends or relatives willing to pay their rent and care for them, they often survived. But after they served out their sentences, they often had trouble finding jobs, because employers were unwilling to risk the newly strengthened provisions of the Drug Offenders Financial Deterrent Act.

At first, terminal evictions were media events. They soon become too common to attract the press.

Drug use declined dramatically, but still, many addicts defied our ef-

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forts. Then the big drug lords, who earlier had applauded our efforts to drive prices up, finally became worried. I suppose they thought the various enforcement agencies would always be their allies, would always preserve the symbiotic relationship that had been so good to both sides. But now the agencies fought the Good War with a kind of holy madness, with no thought of what their people would do once the war was won. The drug lords fought back, assassinating agents and judges and prosecutors.

Those were wonderful times for Stewart, and for me. Everything was going our way.

We designed the Neighborhood Informant Networks, which used the incentive of weekly prizes. Technology came through for us, in the form of inexpensive miniaturized sniffers — which were eventually installed on every lamppost and telephone pole, and which forced the last users deep underground.

We closed the borders. The air force firebombed the coca and poppy and marijuana plantations. The Covert Arm of the DEA sent assassins to liquidate the drug barons.

We won the Good War.

Things weren't perfect; I guess they never are. Too many resources had gone into the war. The Big Dry was in full swing, and food was short. Already the seas were rising faster than the coastal cities could build levees. The AIDS epidemic was gathering steam again, after the latest mutation.

Worst of all, we had used up all our scapegoats. Or so I thought.

At some point I slept. When I woke, it was dark, and the storm was dying. Rob Owen lay on his back, staring at the rusty ceiling, as if he could see something interesting there.

He was so still I thought he was dead. Then he spoke. "John. How am I?"

I thought he was raving again, but it was just his odd sense of humor, because he went on. "Not great, eh? Well, in a hundred years, it won't matter."

I sat up, coughing dusty phlegm. He turned his head to look at me.

"John," he said, "if you'll bring me some water, I think I have one story left in me." He cackled, a feeble, wheezing sound. "But I'm afraid I've missed my chance at a last meal — not that it would have been all that memorable."

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I fetched the cup.

He drank a little of the water. He looked up at me with an almost merry expression.

"A story, then," he said. "Would you believe it? I've got a million stories you haven't heard yet — never will, now. But last one's got to be a doper story. Dope got us where we are today." The old man's voice fell into an oddly formal cadence, as though he had rehearsed his words a thousand times.

"I tried every high there was, when I was young," he said. "I was never much on speed — though once, down in Mexico, I took a handful of biphetamines and wrote a fifty-page letter to an old girlfriend.

"I always loved pot, but it wasn't a world-changer, if you know what I mean. And not good for the lungs." The old man coughed, made a rueful face.

"The poppy I was scared of. There's nothing better when you're sad or empty. Trouble is, it feels so good. Pretty soon you figure out a way to be sad and empty all the time, so I had to steer clear.

"Coke I could never see the appeal of. You get a good buzz for a few minutes — you feel like King Kong, but afterward you know it wasn't true. And it was so expensive; for the price of a half-hour coke pump-up, you could go on a trip that might change the way you saw your life. Acid, that was *the* stuff.

"So that's what I'm going to tell you about, John: a trip Mandy and I took together one night. Yeah, I saw freezers full of bodies; I watched the evening news. But that was just one side, *your* side, and there was another, as beautiful as your side was ugly.

"The premier acid that fall was orange barrels, not quite as good as sunshine, but damn good. We got a four-way hit and split it, up in that one-room Lincoln Street apartment, just the two of us, right around dark. God, it was *good*, John. The rush had that sledgehammer head you got only with the best stuff. We had a poster on the wall across from the bed, the Cream — they had curly hair and paisley shirts — and when the patterns started to wiggle, we knew we were coming on. A rush gauge. The patterns were swimming like a million tiny fish, and Ginger Baker's eyes had sunk back into his head; he looked like a fleshy skeleton."

The old man was talking fast and breathless, hurrying. I felt a sudden

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stab of envy, that he had such a memory to retreat into, a memory intense enough to take him out of his failing body, away from here.

"You've never done acid, John, so I can't really tell you what it's like, but I'll try anyway. The world exists in pulses; visions come to you in waves — surf on the shores of perception. I said to Mandy, 'Jesus, maybe we should have chopped it again; this is heavy.' The room was full of cheap hippie decor, God's-eyes and candles and posters and madras prints; now it was becoming alien, a room from the other side of the sky.

"We had a half-breed white husky named Fruitcake; he seemed weirdly alert, every whisker standing up sharp as needles, his eyes glittering with strangeness. Fruitcake must have sensed the unnaturalness of our regard and gotten freaked, but I translated his uneasiness into some more dangerous mood, and so I got up and locked him in the kitchen alcove, poor guy.

"The surf was crashing, John; the surf was *pounding*. I was never so high, before or since. Our window opened on the fire escape, which overlooked the alleyway behind a strip joint. I watched a drunk tumble out the side door of the bar, and crawl through the twilight to a wall he could huddle against, and it seemed an epic journey, a thousand years of struggle, in those beautiful gray-blue colors of dusk and old brick. I was ready to cry at the beauty of his persistence."

Owen turned his head toward me, a slight smile twitching at his lips. "I know, John, foolishness, madness. But you can't know what it was like."

"No," I answered, and bitter regret scraped at me.

"I'm sorry for that," he said. "Anyway, when I turned away from the window, Mandy had taken off her clothes and was lying on the bed, looking like a naked golden Botticelli angel in heat. She smiled, she cupped one of her little breasts, then ran her hand down her belly, slowly. She had beautiful long fingers. Each pulse of vision showed me a different, more perfect loveliness.

"When I went to her, I must have looked a bit like Fruitcake, every whisker bristling.

"It seemed to last forever, every touch, every thrust bursting with sensation, so dense with pleasure . . . I can't tell you. I was so high that I didn't know if I was Mandy or Rob; I didn't know if I was being penetrated, or penetrating. The boundaries of our selves had broken down entirely. . . . I dont know how many times we did it, but we were both sore the next day.

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"That was the peak, and then we knew we'd live through it. There's always a moment when you're sure you're going to die, if the acid is good enough, but that time, that time we submerged the fear in little deaths.

"So there were still seven or eight hours left to enjoy. We listened to music; we laughed till our throats were raw; we made cookies for later; we pointed out pretty hallucinations to each other.

"I remember looking at a book about wildflowers. The illustrations were soft, dreamy watercolors. I turned to a painting of a passionflower, and it was a mandala, leading me deeper and deeper into some unvisited place of the mind. I saw into that painting a thousand miles; I can't explain to you what I learned.

"Years later I walked through a field of passionflowers, and none of them, for all their dewy reality, could compare with the one I saw that night."

The old man's face had grown taut, skin stretched tight over bone. He wasn't getting much breath.

"You can tell me more later," I said, though truthfully I didn't want him to stop. I wanted the rest of this memory, even though it was secondhand.

"Won't be 'later,' John; I have to hurry. At dawn we were coming down fast, and there's an unpleasant thing about acid, a tired melancholy that comes with the physical exhaustion. The best thing to do is to get out and do something involving, something that forces you to maintain; so we decided to walk up to the Safeway on Colfax and get some breakfast stuff.

"It started to snow when we were halfway there, and we were still a little strange. Walking through those thin, drifting flakes, we met an old woman, out walking her old pug dog. Their faces seemed identical, crinkly and yellow — charming little antiques. Infinitely charming. Oh God. . . ."

He stopped. His face glowed with light that didn't come from the hut's one bulb, and his chest didn't move for a long moment.

I stood over him. He saw me, and the light went out, just like that, and he began to shout.

"Sure, there were freezers full of bodies, John, and worse, and maybe stopping those things was more important than the new worlds that some of us got to explore. Maybe. But you'll never make me believe it!"

The old man was breathing like a faltering engine, shuddering, wheezing, cheeks sucking in, mouth full of blood. His eyes were stretched wide, as if to see everything, or perhaps he was simply fighting against the

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moment when his eyelids would sag no matter how much he wanted them to stay open. "You should rest," I said.

He quieted, until each breath was like a sigh. "Yes," he finally said. "I'll rest."

He had lost interest in me. He didn't die then, by some miracle, but I think he was never truly conscious again.

Now I remember my own moment, though it can't compare with his.

I was eighteen, and no wiser than any other person of that age. I went to a party off-campus and drank too much beer. I had reached that wrapped-in-gauze stage of drunkenness. A young girl took my arm and led me to one of the back bedrooms.

I thought I had forgotten all this. I now remember it perfectly, a memory far clearer than anything that happened yesterday, or the day before, or on any of the endless days since I came to the camp.

She was beautiful, I think. She had long black hair, and her breasts were soft and white inside the loose neckline of her blouse. She held my hand to her; I trembled with the pleasure of the contact.

When I pawed at her zipper, she laughed and pushed me away. She pulled a crumpled cigarette from her jeans. She lit it, eyes shining, and drew the smoke deep.

Her mouth was wide and red, one of those mouths that always look wet and always taste sweet. She said, "Take my breath," and put her lips to mine. I knew what she was doing, but I didn't say no.

The next day I was terribly frightened, not because of the pot — I'd been too drunk to notice any subtle alterations in my perceptions — but because I could not remember if I had used a condom. I was always a careful person, even as a child. When I tested negative, I gave thanks and forgot.

I forgot for more than twenty years. I did good work and raised a family. I never even considered using an illegal drug.

Once I asked Rob Owen how he'd avoided arrest for so long, since he admittedly freely to a long history of drug use. That was when he was still a strong old man, who looked like he might outlive all the younger inmates. He'd smiled, slapped me on the shoulder. "Why, John, I was just like you, in the end. I married again, started a business — we had children, two boys and a girl. I turned into Mr. Clean. I just had too much to lose, too

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many hostages to fortune. Hell, I haven't smoked a joint in twenty-some years."

We needed scapegoats; we really did. The country was sliding into ruin. The government was the biggest employer, and a large percentage of those jobs belonged to Good Warriors, who were no longer needed.

Once again technology came through for Stewart, who had a clear track to the White House, if he could come up with one more good crusade.

A Good War think tank discovered that the brain's receptor sites never forget, that their soft hooks are forever scarred by the not-quite-right shapes of illicit molecules. The think tank devised a simple test.

It became possible to tell if a person had *ever* used an illegal substance.

Stewart volunteered his staff for testing. Most of us came up dirty, and Stewart converted that shock into the Unstable Persons Relocation Act.

And here we are.

In the morning the mirror-suited guards came to remove the body. They wrapped it in a tight gray zipperbag, so that it looked like some sort of pupating larva.

I remembered a thing he'd told me, not long after I had arrived at the camp. "We were butterflies once," he'd said, in a voice full of sad wonder. "But somehow — I don't understand it — we changed back into worms."

"Well, I wouldn't call it 'Quicksand', but all the same I'm relieved that someone showed up."

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Since we published Karen Haber's first story ("Madre de Dios," May 1988), her stories have appeared in Full Spectrum 2, Women of Darkness *and other markets, and her first novel,* THE MUTANT SEASON, *has been published by Bantam/Spectra.*

His Spirit Wife

By Karen Haber

THE DOLL HAS teeth. Sharp, pointy teeth, triangular in shape, like the teeth of a great white shark. It stands, all alone, on the old warped shelf above the fireplace, baring those teeth in a ferocious smile. A shark's smile.

Sarah stares at it uncertainly.

Outside, a light drizzle begins.

"David," she says, "what is this thing?"

He looks up from his lab notes, his dark-bearded face puzzled.

"What thing?"

"This doll or whatever it is. Where did you get it? I didn't notice it before."

He squints through the pre-dusk gloom, then turns on the floor lamp by the couch. "Oh, Rosa gave it to me. Said it was a Mexican good-luck piece. Cute, isn't it?"

"That's not the adjective I'd use. And I never saw anything like that when I was in Mexico City. Not even in the museum."

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David shrugs, goes back to his notes.

The lamplight gives a strange greenish glow to the doll's amber beaded skirt and braided necklace.

Sarah shivers. She thinks of herself as stoic thanks to the extra layer of armor acquired on the graveyard shift in the emergency room. But this doll chills her in a place that all those gunshot wounds and drug overdoses never reached.

"I don't like the way it grins at me."

David puts down his folder, gets up, walks toward the sofa.

"Move over."

Now Sarah is encircled in his arms, her head pillowed on his shoulder. She sniffs his green chambray shirt. It smells of fabric softener. Of husband.

"I know it sounds ridiculous," she says. "Paranoid. But I don't think that thing likes me."

Indulgently, he hugs her. "What's not to like?" He kisses her on the cheek. "You think that thing has a special smile just for you? Come on. You'll get used to it. And it will get used to you. Or else." He nods toward the fireplace.

Sweet, understanding David. He saved her from the drudgery of the E.R. and hospital politics. Now he'll save her from the doll. Sarah laughs.

Brandishing her dust mop like a sword, Rosa strides into the living room, a small brown gladiator. She sees Sarah, frowns.

"You don't like my gift?" Her words are not a question but a challenge.

"It's very interesting," Sarah says, picking up the gauntlet. Her eyes meet Rosa's, lock with them, blue against brown.

"Of course she likes it," David says, his voice gentle. "You're too good to us, Rosa. What would we do without you?"

The little brown woman breaks into a smile, eyes gleaming with frank adoration. She would happily wash and dress David every morning of his life, anointing him for work like an attendant kneeling before a matador. Lacing his shoes. Polishing his watch. White teeth in a brown face; her smile reminds Sarah of the doll on the mantelpiece.

The housekeeper's gaze drifts back to Sarah. The smile vanishes.

"Dinner in fifteen minutes," she announces, mouth a grim line. She withdraws into her fiefdom, the kitchen. Above the fireplace the doll grins fiercely.

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* * *

At night the bedside clock silhouettes David in a wash of red light. Outside, the sound of the rain sets a steady rhythm on their roof and their neighbors' antique, moldering houses.

"I wish you would make more of an effort to get along with Rosa," David whispers.

Why whisper? Sarah wonders. Who can hear? Only the night. The rain. Your wife. Rosa is downstairs, dreaming under her tattered quilt in the bare room behind the kitchen.

She doesn't tell him that she's tried to warm to the small, hard woman and failed. How can she? Sarah has been David's wife for only six months. Tall, blonde, she is the stranger here. Rosa has lived in David's house for six years, defending it against dust, cobwebs, scorpions, and other intruders.

"She doesn't like me."

"She doesn't know you."

"She doesn't want to."

After that, silence. Only the rain whispers against the old gray shingles and tired Victorian gingerbread: the faded grandeur of Galveston's heyday eighty years gone. The Empire of the Gulf Coast smashed in one night by a big wind. Six thousand dead, the history book says, in the hurricane of 1901. Sarah imagines she can hear the maniac wind tearing through the attic, the bedroom, yanking at shutters, grabbing at hinges. But the sound of the rain soothes. There is no wind. She yawns, drifts off to sleep, and dreams of wooden dolls with dark eyes, smiling at her.

SHE PULLS up to the curb outside their house and shuts off the Volvo's engine. The clapboard needs a paint job. But so does every other house on the block. Assaulted by wet Texas winters and cruel summer sun, all these sad, old Victorian ladies are fading to a uniform gray, paint peeling, porches sagging.

The hatchback lifts with a rusty groan. Bags of groceries clutched in either arm, Sarah climbs the wooden stairs. As she reaches for her key, the door flies open. Surprised, she nearly stumbles backward.

At the threshold, Rosa stands, brown shoe-button eyes opaque. Hostile.

"I have already done food shopping," she says.

"There were some things I wanted. . . ."

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"What do you need that you do not already have?"

With effort, Sarah keeps her smile in place, maneuvers around Rosa, who seems planted, a guardian, in the doorway, and staggers inside. Behind her, Rosa sniffs.

"Leave the bags in the kitchen. And be careful."

The housekeeper bustles upstairs, red dustcloth swinging.

Careful of what?

"Crazy old lady."

Despite the scent of lemon wax and chili pepper, the house smells musty. The January smell of Galveston, Sarah thinks. Wet wood and mold.

The bags were heavy. She sinks gratefully into the blue depths of the sofa. She is very light now, leaning back against the cushions, sipping a glass of sherry. The amber liquid warms her like tiny lamps. How good it is to be home. Mozart on the CD player and familiar possessions around me. Sarah sips, then sips again. The wooden doll on the mantel smiles its fierce smile. Sarah stares at the serrated teeth, fascinated. White against brown, each tooth a perfect triangle. Perfect. Triangle.

"Sarah?"

David stands above her, a dark form on which white triangles wink like the afterglow of fireworks. Like teeth.

She blinks. "What are you doing here?"

"It's five o'clock." He reaches down, kisses her on the cheek. "Even the forensics lab shuts down at five."

"That's impossible!" Sarah checks her watch. Ten after five. But how can that be? She'd only just come home. At two.

David picks up her empty sherry glass and holds it to the fading light. "Have you been sitting here all afternoon, drinking?" A furrow forms between his eyebrows.

"No. Don't look at me that way, silly! I must have fallen asleep. I mean, I had a glass of sherry, but that was all."

"Well, unless your liquor tolerance has changed suddenly, even two glasses of sherry are hardly enough to make you yawn. But sleepiness is a sign of pregnancy, isn't it?" His voice is hopeful. Sweet David wants children so badly. Even more than she does.

"Could be. Period's due next week. If I'm late, I'll check with the doctor."

He grins. Reaching behind him, he lifts a brown cardboard box and hands it to her.

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"The remains of the library book sale. These were just going to Goodwill, and I know how you like old books, so I brought them home. Maybe *they'll* keep you awake."

Behind her the grandfather clock tolls the hour ten times in its strange, cracked cadence. Sarah barely notices; sitting cross-legged on the sofa, pink sweatpants grimy from her lap full of old books. The sound of rain is steady, compelling.

Rosa is upstairs, waging war on mildew.

Sarah prowls through the titles: *Ethics. Biology. Our Government Today.* She pauses over *River Journeys through Africa.* The old, cracked volume intrigues her. The copyright reads 1905.

She flips through faded sepia photographs of masks and stolid tribesmen in dance skirts, skims quaint accounts of jungle dangers, near escapes, ugly deaths. On page 205 she turns to a photo. Stops. The caption reads: "Gamberian Spirit Wives."

Staring out at her is a cluster of wooden dolls with triangular teeth, each grinning savagely. Each a first cousin to the doll on the mantel.

Outside, the rain picks up, drumming on the roof. The index leads to page 270:

"Spirit Wives, the iconic representation of the spouse, usually female, often dead, or wished dead. Spirit societies reminiscent of the Yoruba twin fetish societies use these dolls for ritual observances. Tribal songs tell of using the fetish to entrap people's souls."

Mouth open, Sarah stares at the doll, the spirit wife, across the room. Her hunch was right. It isn't Mexican at all. She closes the book triumphantly. She was right. Rosa did lie.

"David, I want to talk to you."

He looks up from his newspaper, face composed. The wind is a faint moan, the rain a thin whisper, masked by the tinkling of a piano concerto, one of Sarah's favorites.

"I don't think Rosa told the truth about that doll."

"Not Rosa again." He sighs. "Why can't you two get along? Why is this silly doll so important?"

"She told you it was a Mexican good-luck piece, right?"

"Yes." His voice was patient.

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"Well, she's wrong."

"Oh?"

Suddenly she feels silly. Petty. But she's got to see this through. "It's African," she says quickly. "Something called a spirit wife, and it's used in rituals to trap people's souls."

David laughs. "Trap people's souls? You sound like you almost believe it. I thought you were the original skeptic."

"Don't make fun of me! Rosa lies to you. Don't you care?" Her voice is high now, brittle, almost hysterical. She can't stop herself. She wants to laugh with him, tell him to forget all this, but something is compelling her. The doll on the mantel is watching her.

David takes her hands in his. "Sweetheart, relax. I'm sorry I teased you."

"You don't believe me, do you? Well, I'll prove it."

She reaches under the couch where she's hidden the book. And feels nothing but varnished pine floorboard. Frantic now, she searches beneath all the furniture. But the book is gone. Where could it be? He'll never believe me now. Never. Hope splintering, she begins to cry, a high, keening sound.

David puts his arm around her.

"It's O.K.," he says gently. "Hey, it's O.K."

Quietly, she sobs, leaning into the comforting warmth of him. Over her shoulder he fumbles with something, holding her with one arm.

"Here, I want you to take this," he says, and hands her a small blue pill. "Come on. It'll make you feel better."

Obediently, Sarah swallows it. Leans back on the couch against soft cushions as David watches. Calm down, she thinks. You're at home. Everything is all right. Soon her arms begin to feel heavy. Warm. She falls into a comfortable doze, her awareness fading, trailing the lazy arabesques of the music through the air. When the sound runs out, she is small, very small, looking across the enormous living room. It seems to be the size of a football field, the pine floorboards and blue dhurrie rug stretching away into the distance toward the far wall.

Sarah makes her way over the hills and along the valleys of the rug until she comes to the bookcase. The journey takes forever, the distance is so vast, and she is frightened by the rumble of thunder, the pounding of rain, the strange shadows the shifting light makes.

"Hurry, Sarah. Hurry," a voice calls to her.

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She scurries along on tiny legs, finally coming to the base of the bookcase. It looms above her now like some monolithic oak skyscraper.

"Climb, Sarah, climb," the voice commands.

Gasping, grunting with exertion, tiny Sarah drags herself up the face of the monolith, grabbing books and bindings for footholds, handrests.

With a desperate sigh, she swings up onto the highest shelf and lies there, panting. Finally her breathing slows.

Nearby, something moves. Sarah turns. The Gamberian spirit wife is standing next to her, smiling its crocodile smile. Craning its wooden neck, the thing looks at her, malice dancing in its shell eyes.

"My name is Rosa," it says. Its pointed shell teeth move sideways like saw blades. "I have been waiting for you."

"No!" Sarah cries. "No! No! I want to get down!" She starts shaking. Then she opens her eyes. David is leaning over her, gently rocking her shoulder.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." His light tone belies the worry in his face.

Sarah forces a smile and sits up, pulling away from the blue cushions.

"Just dreaming," she says.

"Feel better?"

"Of course." She smiles. I've got to get ahold of myself, she thinks.

Outside, the rain slows to a trickle.

THE BEDSIDE clock reads 1:30 A.M., red numerals staining the sheets with their glow. Sarah turns over. Beside her, David snores gently. She listens to his even breathing as though it were a prayer.

"Sarah." A whispered summons. Rain batters the window, trying to get in.

She rises soundlessly, pads downstairs, and climbs the mantelpiece.

The spirit wife reaches for her hand. Together they walk the slippery length of the wooden shelf and pass behind the bookcase into a narrow crawl space.

A single naked bulb hangs from the end of a long wire, the shade eaten away long ago. Streamers of gray cobwebs festoon the pine rafters, casting odd looping shadows against the unpainted drywall.

An old green camelback trunk sits in the corner, the leather cracked and crazed with age. With a nod, the spirit wife opens the trunk. Inside, it is lined with pink-and-white chintz. Sarah climbs in, digging down

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through the jumble of yellowed newspaper clippings quietly flaking to dust.

A staircase opens beneath her, and she hurries down it into a dark, quiet place. Maybe she'll be safe here. Somewhere, far above her, she hears the lid of the trunk close. But the dark has a strange glow to it, red, with writhing shapes and yellow eyes. And Sarah is not safe. She's in a dark forest. Black trunks of trees, leprous and scaly, thrust up toward the roof of the trunk. But the trunk is gone, and Sarah is outside in the cold wind, the driving rain, her thin nightgown plastered against her skin. She runs, crying as the spines of the blood trees tear at her hair, her skin. And somebody is laughing. It sounds like Rosa.

"Sarah!"

She turns toward the shout. The spirit wife stands in the midst of the woods, grinning. Sarah drifts toward her. Tree limbs writhe, bend, tear at her hair. The sky is blood red, dripping.

"Look, Sarah." The spirit wife points to a dark shape at the foot of a thorn tree. It's a sack, collapsed inward. Sarah stumbles, falls over it. No, not a sack. A body. Frantic, she stares at the wet face. The slack jaw. Pale, bloodless skin. It's a dead face, just like dozens she's seen before on hospital tables, lit by harsh fluorescent lights. But it's her face.

"I told you to be careful," the spirit wife says in Rosa's voice.

Sarah begins to scream.

"Sarah!"

She sits up in bed. David is holding her, his voice thick with sleep.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"Bad dream," she whispers, safe in his arms. Bad dream.

"The third time this week. Did you go for a pregnancy test yet?"

"No. I'm scheduled on Thursday."

"Well, I want you to see a friend of mine before then. Elaine Taylor."

"Another pediatrician?"

"She's a psychiatrist."

"You've got to be kidding." Sarah had never cared for the doctors who work on the locked wards — too often they belonged in the metal cages themselves. But David is adamant.

"Tomorrow," he says. "These dreams have got me worried."

Me, too, she thinks.

"All right," she says. "I'll go."

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* * *

Dr. Taylor is a lean woman with tight, curly auburn hair flecked with gray. She wears a white lab coat and holds out her hand for Sarah to grasp.

"David, why don't you get a cup of coffee?" the doctor says in a rough alto voice. She is fifty-five, maybe sixty. She watches David leave, then settles into a brown leather chair.

"Your husband tells me you've been getting a bit depressed. Anxious."

Sarah shrugs. "I always get depressed in the wintertime."

"Many people do." Dr. Taylor pauses. "Any children?"

"Not yet. Soon, I hope."

"Do you work?"

"Not now."

"Any hobbies?"

"I like to read. And music. The symphony."

"Where are your people from?" Dr. Taylor pulls a cigarette from her pocket, puts it in her mouth, and lights it.

"Austin," Sarah says. Politely, she refuses the doctor's offer of a cigarette. She's seen too many cancer deaths.

"Good for you. Filthy habit. Wish I could quit." The psychiatrist inhales deeply, exhales a cloud of white smoke. "Where did you meet David?"

"A medical convention."

"You were a nurse?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you get a job?"

"Frankly, I'm tired of all the blood. And David thinks we should start a family."

"And . . . ?"

"We're trying." Sarah blushes. When was the last time she blushed?

"What's this about a problem with the housekeeper?"

"Rosa?" Sarah shrugs. Careful now. Dr. Taylor will think you're nuts. "She's, um, kind of resentful of me, I think. She's been with David for years."

"And you've been married how long?"

"Six months."

"Maybe you should get a new housekeeper."

Sarah shakes her head. "David would never hear of it."

"Wouldn't he? Have you insisted?"

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"It wouldn't do any good." Sarah stares out the window at the gray rain. Bleak outside. Bleak inside. "David loves me very much. But he's so attached to Rosa. I guess he feels responsible for her. She's getting old. If he fires her, she might have to go on unemployment."

"I see." Dr. Taylor stubs out her cigarette in a green glass ashtray. "And you agree with him?"

"I — I don't know."

"Really?" She looks at Sarah. A shrewd, probing look.

A pang of anxiety catches Sarah in her stomach. She's given the wrong answer. Quick, give the right one, and the doctor will leave her alone.

"Maybe not," she says, knowing it's the wrong answer again.

"Hmm." Dr. Taylor checks her watch. "I've got a consultation in five minutes. But I'd like to talk to you again, Sarah. What about next week, same time?"

Damn. "All right."

"Meanwhile, I suggest you think about getting out of the house more often. A part-time job. Some volunteer work. Get a little more fresh air. And tell David I'll see him tomorrow." She nods, sees Sarah to the thick oak door. Waves her through it. Closes it.

Safe on the other side, Sarah takes a deep breath. Never did care for shrinks. She opens her purse, spills out a mirror to check her lipstick. Her reflection smiles back, and for a moment the teeth look sharp, triangular, very white against pink lips.

"No!" Sarah gasps. "Stop it! Go away!"

The triangles fade to a ghost image and vanish. Sarah again looks at her smile. Normal. Everything is normal. Nothing happened. Her lipstick is fine. She shuts the mirror.

A week later she feels fine. Her period still has not come, and she's waiting eagerly for the results of the pregnancy test. The house — her house, she reminds herself — is quiet. Rosa has the day off. A few dust motes dance in a shaft of weak sunlight in the kitchen.

Dr. Taylor was right, Sarah thinks. But I don't need to see her again. I'll cancel the appointment.

That decided, she picks up a magazine and walks into the living room, humming. Drops the magazine.

The familiar possessions, the couch, the bookcase — all are gone,

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vanished. In their place a dark forest bristles. Blood-red trees crawling with purple fungi have sprouted through the floor. Her heart begins to pound, and the echo of it pulsates through the building. The walls are pulsing in and out, red stains dripping down them.

"It's a dream," she says. "I'm asleep, and when I wake up and open my eyes, everything will be fine.' She closes her eyes. Opens them. The stains are pooling on the floor in wet red puddles. The front door is too far away. Helpless, she is drawn deeper into the living house.

In the kitchen the table cracks open, and a huge spiked head thrusts up from the center. Its face is the face of the spirit wife.

Sarah backs away from it, reaching for the wall. But there is no wall, and she falls through into the basement — which is not a basement, but a swamp filled with howling, gibbering creatures. From every corner, yellow eyes watch her, malicious, unblinking.

In the center of the swamp, a figure floats above the muck, wrapped in strands of orange fire. Rosa.

"He is mine," she says, her voice like thunder. "Mine, or no one will have him."

Sarah begins to sink in the muck. It rises, higher and higher. Almost to her throat. She must do something.

"No!" Sarah whispers. The whispers become a shout as she struggles, pulling free of the noisome, clinging mud. Rushing forward, she grabs at the fiery woman and shoves her against a thorny tree.

"No, dammit. No, no, no!" She is screaming, crying. "Leave me alone!"

"What are you muttering?" David asks. "Sarah, do you feel all right?"

She looks at her husband, sitting on the blue couch, which does not have thorns.

"Fine," she says.

"I don't like this. I'm going to call Elaine."

"Don't bother. Please."

The bookcase, too, is in place, unchanged.

On the mantel the spirit wife grins.

Sarah takes a deep breath. She must fight back. She knows it now. She gets up, walks into the kitchen, determination giving her strength. The round oaken table is whole, unbroken, exactly as she left it. She rubs her hands along its golden curve, confidence flowing back into her veins.

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Real, she thinks. This is real. She turns away from the table. The flowered wallpaper in the kitchen is firm under her touch as she traces the delicate outline of a yellow primose.

It's mine, she thinks. I won't give in. I won't let her win.

"A doll with triangular teeth? And you dream about it coming to life to lead you into some kind of hellish forest?"

Dr. Taylor has finished half a pack of cigarettes. The air is thick with smoke. Sarah would like to open a window to enjoy the fresh spring air, but hesitates to suggest it.

"That's right. Our housekeeper gave it to David. Only, it's not a good-luck charm. It's some kind of voodoo doll from Africa."

"What did you call it again?"

"Gamberian spirit wife."

She watches Dr. Taylor scribble on a battered yellow notepad. She is not laughing at her. She looks serious. Grim, even.

"Thank you, Sarah. I'll check into this. Now I'm afraid our time is up, but I want you to promise me you'll come see me next week, same time."

"Of course, Doctor."

She walks out of the smoky office into the sunshine and stretches luxuriously in its warmth.

Saturday morning, Sarah comes downstairs to find the mail waiting on the oak table by the front door. She grabs the blue envelope from the clinic and eagerly tears it open. The test results are positive. At last.

"David! Oh David, I don't believe it!"

He comes running from the kitchen, and she waves the test results at him playfully.

"We're pregnant! I'm so happy!"

With a whoop, he sweeps her into his arms, kissing her lips, cheeks, forehead.

"We'll celebrate," he says. "Tonight. Right away. We'll get dressed up and go someplace special."

Giggling and kissing, they hug.

The phone rings. Sarah picks up the extension by the couch.

"Sarah. This is Elaine Taylor. Sorry to bother you on a Saturday."

Today Sarah loves everybody. Even the psychiatrist.

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"I'm pregnant," she says.

There is a pause. "Well, that's wonderful news. I know you must be delighted. Congratulations." The doctor's voice warms. "I won't keep you, then. Just wanted to tell you that I'd done a little research on what we'd talked about."

"I'm sorry. . . ."

"The Gamberian spirit wife?"

"Oh yes." Suddenly it seems ages ago. In the dim past.

"Yes. And Sarah, you were right. There is such a thing."

"You found it?"

"Took me some searching and the *National Geographic* index in the public library. But yes, I found it. They used them for some kind of voodoo ritual."

"I'm not crazy!"

Dr. Taylor chuckles dryly. "No, of course not. Just a little pregnant, my dear. But take my advice: get rid of that doll. It sounds like a dismal artifact, and I don't think it adds to your peace of mind. Now I'd like to talk to David for a moment about that housekeeper."

Sarah's heart swells with gratitude. She understands!

"Thank you, Dr. Taylor. Oh, thank you. Here's David."

She hands him the phone. Cheeks pink with determination, she tears a plastic garbage bag from the dispenser under the sink. Strides into the living room. Opens the bag. Reaches for the spirit wife.

Her hand closes on air. She looks down and sees swirling darkness. She is falling. Falling. Back into the red swamp.

Around her the creatures shriek and mutter. They crawl down from their trees to grab her arms with their slimy hands, tugging at her hair, shaking her.

Tree stumps with gaping mouths reach for her. Sarah pulls back, gasping. But there are strange, oily brambles, twining like snakes around her feet, biting into her ankles, trapping her. In pain, in fear, she cries out.

"Sarah! Jesus, please answer me!"

David, wild-eyed, is holding her wrists. Behind him the phone dangles, impotent, forgotten, on its chord. Sarah blinks. They are in the living room. Her legs are crossed under her, unmarked, unbitten. A plastic garbage bag makes a gray puddle by her feet.

"Elaine is right," he says. "We'll get rid of the damned doll."

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Sarah's spirits rise. "And what about Rosa? Does she go, too?"

David grimaces. "Elaine suggested that," he says. "But she doesn't understand the situation. I'm afraid you don't quite see it either, dear."

But Sarah does see. Too clearly. On the mantel, the spirit wife watches, smiling.

"What can I do, honey?" David asks. His voice is desperate. "I love you. I'll do anything to help you. Anything. You know that."

She looks at her husband. She loves him very much.

"Anything? Do you really mean it?"

"You know I do."

"Then get rid of Rosa."

"I can't."

Sarah sighs. She has no choice. "All right, then. Help me up."

He holds out his hand.

Sarah reaches for him, grabs hold, pulls. He struggles against her grip for a moment, but only for a moment. Then he yields.

And they are both standing in the blood-red woods, the sky pouring down upon them, hot and wet. Around them the trees writhe. The floor of the forest is alive with movement. With whispers. A screaming shadow flies overhead, all whiplike tail and fanged mouth.

"Where are we?" David asks, clutching her hand.

"Together."

He stares silently around the strange place, a solid man in a blue shirt and jeans. The most solid thing in this — in any — world. His eyes meet hers.

"Good."

And they laugh, joyously falling into one another's arms, until tears wet their cheeks. They are free. They are safe. As they laugh, the rain stops. The bad time is over. They're together again, and everything's going to be all right. Forever.

They begin to walk, carefully. With a sigh, the forest floor settles, forming a path for their feet. David points out a boiling lake, bright yellow, in the distance. There's so much to see. To learn. They smile at one another with perfect pointed white teeth.

Sarah thinks she hears a howl of anguish, of defeat and frustration. It sounds like distant thunder, like Rosa's voice, but it is very faint and far away. The cry fades as, hand in hand, they walk deeper into the woods.

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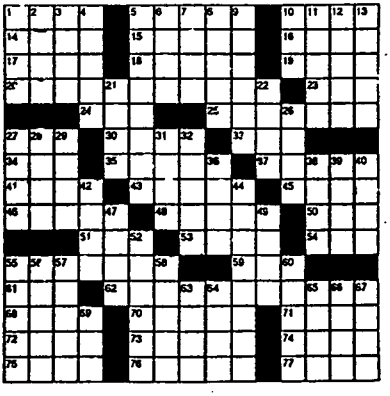
Crossweird Puzzle

HUMOR BY LARRY TRITTEN

THE READERSHIP of fantasy, horror, and science fiction includes a nucleus of hard-core enthusiasts who tend to be more avid and partisan than readers of other genres. It was for such an aficionado that the following crossword puzzle was designed. Don't tackle it unless your knowledge in this area is extraordinary.



ACROSS

1. What Norman Bates gets himself for Mother's Day
5. Author of story about tiny championship basketball team cloned from famous writer, *The Harlan Globetrotters*
10. Where a narcissist kisses himself under mistletoe
14. Chaser in Atlantis
15. Why a thesaurus isn't a lizard
16. How vampires shave without seeing themselves in the mirror
17. He claims to have seen flying saucers dispensing extraterrestrial hollandaise
18. Director of horror film for masochists, *Thank God It's Friday the 13th*
19. Unsuccessful witch who wanted cocker spaniel for familiar
20. Militant feminist who proposed changing name of Tarzana to Janestown
23. Mermaid who had *menage a trois* with sailor and marlin
24. Most popular fantasy writer in Bellevue
25. Body snatchers rejected hers
27. Writer of hard science stories who thought nougat was an element
30. Customary greeting in lieu of handshake when meeting a blob
33. Science fiction writer who will not drive a car but may travel in an airplane depending on what the stewardesses look like

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34. Physicist who minored in gynecology
35. The first dimension is length, the second dimension is width, the third dimension is depth, the fourth dimension is time, the Fifth Dimension is a singing group, and the sixth dimension is _____
37. Impoverished science fiction writer who couldn't afford typewriter and submitted stories written in alphabet soup letters
41. Fan's term for inappropriately placed universal Product Code that covers a woman's breasts on cover art
43. Lawyer in Bride of Frankenstein's divorce
45. Jazz astronomer who wrote *Black Hole Blues*
46. Minor Greek philosopher who said you can't drown in the same river twice
48. Writer killed in freak accident —fatally injured by falling hunchback
50. Airline favored by bicoastal gremlins
51. Horror story about man who collects underwear of the dead
53. Food for thought among telepaths
54. Horror story about puppy jugglers
55. Neptune described him as worth his weight in goldfish
59. Part of atom least likely to be used in new wave song title
61. She proposed use of atomic power in show business
62. Country that refused Godzilla a visa
68. Where transcendental stuff goes
70. Cosmology that posits existence of left-handed god
71. Futurist whose goal is interplanetary Muzak
72. Joke played by Incredible Shrinking Man on his tailor
73. He served time for breaking Sturgeon's Law
74. A nova ruins it
75. Einstein squared
76. Politician spared by natural selection
77. Feminist choice for Pithecanthropist Sexist

DOWN
1. Word most often typed by James Jeans' monkeys
2. Mediterranean cheese Asimov is anagram for
3. Krafft-Ebing's term for voyeur who watches mitosis
4. Potation presumably contained in Big Dipper
5. Director of sequel of *Quest For Fire, Quest For Fire Insurance*
6. Inventor of Procrustean hassock
7. Golem who ate kosher
8. Fundamentalist who denounced those who want to save the whales
9. Bird whose call sounds like Cthulhu
10. Retarded science fiction writer

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who wrote about a faster-than-light-bill space drive
11. He wore three piece soup and meat loafers to the Edible Clothing Ball
12. Gravity keeps it in your pants
13. *Hors d'oeuvre* favored by phenomenologists
21. In Zen Judaism, the sound of one hand collecting money
22. Science fiction story about the most intelligent man in the world who forgets how to spell the word assimilate
26. Precognitive nymphomaniac bored by foreplay
27. Gort's middle number
28. Parallel world without v w ls
29. Type of club heavy metal bands prefer to play on low gravity planets
31. Author of story in which a Vegematic and a Swiss army knife mate and give birth to a tool that can do anything but has a neutral attitude
32. Robot slang for toilets
36. He thought menses was organization for high IQ people
38. Ingredients of Stanislaw
39. Tennis instructor who taught Bjorn Cyborg
40. Etiquette advisor who taught Uri Geller which spoon to bend first
42. Story about extraterrestrials who bring world peace to Earth, not to mention a musical hemorrhoid ointment
44. Editor of short-lived unaspiring science fiction magazine *Moon Stories*
47. Mutant cologne
49. Neo-minimalist philospher who published his major work on a T-shirt
52. It's ilk
55. Irish blobs, Murphy Amorphous and Mickey McMorph
56. Story in which an astronaut and an extraterrestrial miss each other coming and going in outer space but bump heads on the New York subway
58. Subject of roboporn
60. Story about anthropomorphic cat who goes broke trying to sell life insurance
63. Story about giant entomologist who attacks cities
64. Triffids will, but Tribbles won't
65. Author of story about the last man in the world with time enough at last to listen to all the music cassettes he wants to on a Walkman but who breaks his glasses and keeps trying to hear them using a pair of earmuffs
66. Story about down to Earth interstellar traveler — street-walker on Hollywood Boulevard
67. Occult magazine with centerfold of astral body
69. Backward country with astrological observatories

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"In the Wheels" is Daryl Gregory's first sale. Its author writes: "I began teaching high school English and writing fiction in 1987; the onset of the former scared me into getting serious about the latter. I live in East Lansing, Michigan with my wife and cat, but I grew up in Illinois, the son of Tennessee mountain people, as parts of the story might suggest."

IN THE WHEELS

By Daryl Gregory

And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the colour of the amber, out of the midst of the fire.

. . . and this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man . . . . Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.

— Ezekiel 1:4-5, 20

IT WAS JUST A CAR.

"No!" said Zeke from underneath it, "it's more than that, Joey. It's fucking perfect."

We were fifteen. Zeke had found a huge underground vault, a crypt of old cars in the City, and he had dragged me out there to hold the

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lantern while he checked it out. I was supposed to be on the way to my Uncle Peter's farm to help bring in the hay.

"Zeke, don't be crazy. Let's get out of here." The City was death; everybody knew that. I could feel the germs and the rads crawling across my skin. We were going to be dead in three days with huge welts all over our skin. Superstitious, I know.

Zeke could always get me to do stuff I never would have done on my own. He would say something like, Why don't we go up and sit on the white highways? — and even though I thought it was a completely stupid idea, I would go. Or he would say, Let's go into Dead City and look for a car — and even though nobody'd lived in the city since before the Cold, I would say all right, and we'd go.

And here I was.

The car looked to me like a crumbling wreck. It was a big Chevy, which Zeke pronounced "Shev-ee" like his father Frank. The tires were flat and rotted out, the paint job was webbed with cracks, and the stuff on the inside was all split and pitted.

Zeke rolled out from beneath the car and grinned. "Don't be such a little girl. The block's intact. It'll work."

"You're crazy," I said. The car looked nothing like the chariots they raced on the highways, and I told him so. "Besides, how are you going to get it out of here?" We'd had to dig our way through rubble ourselves, and I saw no way to get this heap up to the surface.

"Leave that to me," he said. I should have known then that he was serious. There was no natural way to move that much rock out of the way, much less carry the car up.

Two weeks later Zeke caught me as I was walking home from the schoolhouse. The palms of his hands were wrapped in rags. "Joey boy. Tonight we should take a little trip."

"What did you do to your hands?"

"Nothing. Hurt 'em working on the car. Will you be there?"

"I can't sneak out again without getting caught. Why can't we wait till Saturday?"

My sisters raced past us. "We're gonna tell Firstmother you're talking to Zeke!"

"Oh Lord Jesus," I said. I would catch heck later.

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"Don't worry about it. Tonight, all right? And bring paint."

"Paint? Where am I going to get paint?"

"Check your barn, stupid."

Zeke was right, as usual. There was paint in the barn, old cans of red that Grampa had mixed years ago. But I couldn't take off with it until nightfall.

The fire is always the center of the home. Father had built the chimney first, stone by stone, and the kitchen around it. As the children were born, he had added small rooms that sprang off from the kitchen at odd angles, and after I'd gotten big enough to help him, we built the porch around the front door.

Firstmother started her prayer that evening with the usual, "Thank you, Jesus, for the Summer Sun," while Sara, my pop's new young wife (barely older than me), passed potatoes and a little mashed corn around the table. Pop took a potato and bit into it. Firstmother went through the entire list of crops we were hoping for, plus all of the sins me, my sisters, Pop, and, most of all, Sara, had committed that week. She kept going until she saw that Sara was almost finished setting the table, and then Firstmother finished off the whole thing by saying, "and especially watch over our young Joseph, and protect him from the temptations that so beset a young man." My sisters giggled; then we all said, "Amen." Sara sat down gratefully.

Firstmother eyed the table. "I don't see no salt here."

Sara jumped up and vanished into the kitchen, and Firstmother said, "I been hearing that you were running around with Zeke again after Schoolhouse." My sisters giggled again.

"No, ma'am, I wasn't 'running around.' I just —"

"Don't talk back to me, boy." Sara came back into the room carrying the salt bowl. My father was chewing intently, silently, as always. And Sara was worse than no help, a liability.

It was time. I either had to stand up for Zeke or listen forever to everything Firstmother said. I looked her in the eye. "What's the matter with Zeke, anyways?"

She stared back. "You know what's the matter with Zeke. His father's a drunk, a black magician, a road racer, a no-good consorter with demons —"

"Enough, Rachel."

Firstmother stopped in midsentence. Sara and us kids dropped our

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eyes instantly to our plates. Pop *never* spoke at the dinner table.

"What did you say, Samuel?" Firstmother said icily.

Pop looked up. He kept chewing as he talked, red potatoes mashing between his teeth. His voice was quiet, like when he was explaining why he was going to hit you for not feeding the horses on time. "I said, Rachel, that enough was enough. Frank Landers has had his troubles. I don't want any wife of mine continuing to add to them."

Firstmother was almost sputtering. "I will not have my son hanging around with the son of a *demoner!*" She picked up her plate and stalked to the kitchen.

Pop picked up another potato. My sisters stared moodily at their food. And even with her head bowed and her hair falling across her eyes, I could see the barest beginnings of a smile on Sara's face.

Just after ten that night, I was banging around in the dark with two cans of red paint. I'd stuffed my blankets with pillows and climbed out the window, hoping that Firstmother wouldn't think to check on me — she did that sometimes.

I was circling Zeke's house to knock on his bedroom window, when I saw lamplight seeping through the cracks of the old shed set away from the house. The door, usually chained shut, was busted open. Zeke was there, his back to me as he rummaged through some cabinets at the back of the shed. And there was something else.

It was a Pontiac — one of the big cars they race down in Mexicana. It was painted almost all black, but in the flicker I could make out a spider-web of silver lines. The tires were low, and there was some rust along the bottom of the driver's-side door, but overall it looked real good.

"You're late," Zeke said when he turned around. "Here. Grab these." He was holding up three dusty books, two cans of paint, and a bucket of brushes in his bandaged hands.

"Lord Jesus, Zeke! Where did this thing come from?"

"Nowhere." He dropped the paint at my feet and circled the room, blowing out lanterns.

"C'mon, whose car is this? Is this your dad's?" There'd been rumors about Zeke's dad, Frank, ever since I was a kid. Everybody knew he was a drunk now, but every once in a while, you'd hear an adult say something about the magic, or a pro driver.

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Zeke pushed me and the buckets outside. He wound the chain up around the door handle and said, "Forget it. That car ain't there, you understand?" He turned to me, and in the moonlight I could barely make out a smile. The smile was always the end of the argument with Zeke. "Ready for a little hike?"

We took the shortcuts and made it into the City in under two hours. For the entire trip, Zeke wouldn't talk about the Pontiac, but the subject was still cars.

"Joey," he said, "I'm gonna race on the white highways. I'm gonna win. Then I'm going to Mexicana, and I'm gonna race the Brujo."

"The Brujo? Phil Mendez? You're crazy, Zeke."

"You know I'm crazy. That's why I'm gonna win."

"That's why you're going to die. Messing with the demons and magic is serious stuff. I don't even know why I'm helping you."

He nudged me. "You haven't figured that out, Joey? Because you *love* this shit. You love being bad, breaking the rules, messing with magic. And if anything goes wrong, you can blame it on mean old Zeke."

"You're full of it," I said. But I knew he was right.

THE CHEVY was sitting in an alley that had been cleared of rubble.

"Christ in the tomb," I whispered.

Zeke started lighting lamps that had been placed in a circle around the car. I was conscious of Dead City surrounding us on all sides. I set my buckets on the ground and walked forward.

"Christ in the tomb," I said again, louder. "How did you get it up here?"

"An angel pushed the boulders out of the way. What do you think?" Zeke opened one of the books and began flipping through its pages.

"Zeke! You already did it? What happened?"

"Nothing happened." He studied a diagram on one page of the book. "Now get those cans of red over here. I want to prime it in red."

"Jesus Lord, I should have known it when I saw your hands." I followed him around the circle. "What was it like? Did it have wings? Did it look like the Devil?"

"How the hell would I know what the Devil looks like?" Zeke snapped the book shut and handed me a big brush. "Smooth, slow strokes, all over the hood. Don't mess it up." He set the books off to the side carefully.

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"Zeke, why do we have to work on it out here, in the City?"

"Can't you feel it?" His voice sounded like he was speaking from under the ground. "There's a lot of death here. A lot of power." Death. Power. I was out of my depth.

I didn't ask any more questions. We worked silently for almost three hours. Two hours before dawn, we put the cans and brushes beneath the car, doused the lamps, and walked home. Zeke whistled the whole way.

One or two days a week for almost two months, I made the trek out to the City with or for Zeke. He had stopped going to Schoolhouse. He would stay awake for days, working on the car, talking about how he was going to take it on the Circuit and blow everybody else away. I'd bring him some food from home, and he'd barely look at it.

Looking back, I know I could have done something to stop him. I could have hid the tools, or sabotaged the paint, or told my folks what we were doing. But Zeke was Zeke. And I couldn't imagine any situation that Zeke couldn't handle.

Me, I was a different story. I was petrified Firstmother or Father would find out what I was up to. I would tell Zeke that I was absolutely never coming back to the City. But Zeke would tell me he needed me to bring something out; and, sure enough, that night I would climb out my window and head toward Dead City. Considering my nervousness and lack of confidence, I had amazing luck. Of all the times I sneaked out of the house to go help him, I was only caught once.

It was mid-June, and I was late coming back from the City. The sun was just starting to come up behind me. I was about to boost myself over the window ledge and start pretending to be asleep, when Sara walked around the corner. What was she doing up this early? She stared at me, and I slowly dropped back to the ground. If she told Firstmother (which she wouldn't) or Father (which she probably would), I was in big trouble.

"Sara, listen . . . ," I began. She shushed me with a finger to her lips. She grinned like a little kid.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "I'm Secondmother now."

"That's great," I said. We stood there in silence for a while, me nervously watching the sun get bigger and brighter every minute. Finally she reached up and touched the top of my head.

"You'd better get inside now, Joseph." She turned her back to me and

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walked around the corner again. I scrambled up the wall and dove into bed. A few minutes later, Father came in to wake me up for the morning chores.

The night we were to call the Engine, I walked into the City early, just before dusk. I wanted to look at the car alone, in daylight.

I took almost as much pride in it as Zeke did.

At that time I'd seen only one race on the white highways, between two cars on the Pro Circuit from Nevada. I'd thought the cars were the most beautiful, terrible things in the world. But Zeke's car, our car, surpassed them.

Not in beauty. Even by lamplight, the lines on the Chevy did not look delicate; the interior did not look padded and luxurious; the wheels were not trimmed in gold like the Circuit cars were. But for sheer terribleness, you couldn't match Zeke's Chevy.

It was red, but a red shot through with yellow and white lines that, by lamplight, flickered and burned. I'd asked Zeke how he did it. How did he know what design was needed, what pattern of lines and circles and rectangles was called for? Zeke said that every pattern on every car was exactly the same, but I said that was horse-hockey — I'd seen the Pro cars, and each design was as different from the other as strangers.

As I entered the alley, I could see that the Chevy was no less terrible by daylight. I could make out each line and shape, and as I looked, I began to grasp the logic of their relationships. Each line bound one shape to another; each shape froze the line in its path. There was no way to look past that design to the base red, and there was no path from the red out.

The pattern was bars to a cage, and the cage was the car.

Suddenly I realized that there was someone in the car behind the wheel; nearly as quick I knew it was Frank. The door opened, and he heaved himself out. He stumbled forward, then leaned against the hood. As I walked toward him, he drew a flask and swallowed hard.

"Who are you?"

"Joseph Peterson," I said. I was ready to break and run if he got crazy. I'd seen Frank drunk, but I'd always stayed out of his way. So did Zeke.

His eyes narrowed. "Sam's boy?"

"That's right." He shook his head as if to clear it. He looked at the car beneath his hand.

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"What the hell are you boys trying to do out here?"

"Nothing, sir. . . ."

"Nothing? C'mere, boy. Look at this." Cautiously, I walked over. He traced one of the lines with his fingers. The finger — and now, I noticed, the entire hand as well — was covered with pink scars. I looked at where he pointed. There was a small break in the paint. "That's sloppy, boy, sloppy that could get you killed. That line's useless, and if your Engine finds that break, it's gonna try to pop right out of there." He pulled me around to the open driver's door. "Look at that steerin' wheel."

I looked. "I don't see anything wrong."

Frank made a sound like a man trying to push a mule uphill, and he shoved me into the seat. "Put your hands on the wheel."

I did as I was told, but I was also trying to see if I could scoot over to the other door and get out before he could grab me again. "No no no. Look where your hands are. Put 'em at two o'clock and ten. Now, see where the pattern stops to either side of your hands? Those are your channels, and if your hand's not *completely* covering those blank spots when the blood's flowing, the Engine's gonna climb up into your lap and bite your head off. Then you go zombi."

"Zeke's hands are bigger," I said defensively.

"Nobody races with channels that big. Don't you understand, boy? It's a two-way street. *You* reach *in*, and *it* reaches *you*."

"But Zeke says with bigger channels, you get more speed, more fuel out of the Engine. . . ."

"Boy, speed's not everything. . . ."

Suddenly a big bandaged hand reached in and hauled Frank out of the door. Zeke held him by the shirt collar and shouted at him. "What are you doing here, old man? What are you doing here!" Zeke pushed Frank away from him. Frank stumbled backward and fell to the ground.

Zeke stalked off to the other side of the car. I was left looking at Frank. He wasn't getting up. After half a minute, I got out of the car and went to see if he was all right.

His eyes were open, but he wasn't seeing me. It was like he was caught up in a memory, or a dream that he couldn't shake.

"Can I give you a hand?" I asked. His eyes focused on me. He shook his head and slowly levered himself up into a sitting position. After a while he eased himself up and walked stiff-leggedly out of the alley.

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"That was kind of rough, don't you think?" I told Zeke.

He didn't answer, or even look at me. He was flipping through one of his books again. And if I hadn't know Zeke as well as I did, I would have sworn he looked like a boy about to cry. He slammed the book shut, picked up a brush, and began filling in the breaks in the lines of the pattern with quick, angry strokes. He left the channels on the steering wheel untouched.

An hour or so later, Zeke began to talk again as he worked, but it was only about the Circuit, and how fast this car was going to be, and taking on Brujo Mendez in Mexicana.

"What's the big deal with Mendez?" I asked.

"He's the best," Zeke said. "No one's ever beaten him."

By eleven, Zeke was almost finished.

If the car was a cage, the Gateway pattern was the carrot to lure the Engine in. Zeke had drawn three blue circles on the ground, lined up in a row, each circle edge touching the edge of another circle. The biggest circle was around the car. The middle circle was smaller and laced with intersecting diagonal lines. The last circle was the smallest. Zeke was sitting in the center of that circle and painting in a complex double row of shapes and lines around the inside of the border.

"I don't get it," I said.

Zeke smiled. "I sit here," he said, "and the demon pops up there." The middle circle. "Then it becomes a test. Can I push it into the car or not?"

"What if you can't?"

"Then either of two things is going to happen: it's going to force its way into my circle, or it's going to go back where it came from."

"And if it gets in?"

"Then you'd better run like hell, Joey. I'll already be gone."

"Shit."

Zeke laughed. "I never heard you swear before! You're hanging out with the wrong guy, Joseph."

"I know it. When do you start?"

"Midnight."

We waited out the hour (Zeke inside his circle, me outside the whole pattern) listening to the silence of Dead City. I still feared the City, but it was a familiar fear.

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I tried to imagine thousands of people living in these buildings, but I couldn't do it. Where would all the food come from? What did they do for a living, besides drive cars?

Zeke said, "All right. It's time." Zeke told me to douse the lanterns around the alley. Before the last of the light went out, though, I saw Zeke take off his bandages. The scabs on his palms looked like black holes in his skin. I turned away and doused the last lamp.

Moonlight glinted off something metallic in Zeke's hands. I heard him gasp, and then I saw blotches of phosphorescent blood appear in the middle circle. Then the entire pattern flared into blue fire.

After a minute the fire subsided to a glow that lit up the alley. Zeke sat in the center of his circle, hugging his knees, staring at the middle circle. The blotches were burning brighter now. I gazed from Zeke to the middle circle to the car. For the longest time, nothing happened at all.

I can't tell you how the thing appeared, because I was looking at Zeke's face when I heard it. It sounded like a huge downpour, or the center of a waterfall. Zeke gritted his teeth and grunted like he'd been stabbed in the gut, and I flicked my eyes to the middle circle again. It was already there. . . .

. . . the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It swirled like a dust devil, but a dust devil made of light. It was not green, or red, or any other color, really. It simply *was*. I know that's crazy.

It spun toward Zeke, moaning like a tornado, and as it moved, I saw the bright splotches rise up and become part of the whirlwind. It battered at Zeke's circle, sparks flying as flakes of paint chipped off the ground and joined the spinning air. Zeke clenched his fist. Blood poured down his arms. The thing spun backward; then Zeke was on his feet, shouting at the top of his lungs. I couldn't make out the words over the roar.

After that, it was over almost instantly. The whirlwind broke through the circle surrounding the car, then vanished. The circles and rectangles on the Chevy flared a moment and went dark. The blue circles on the ground faded.

We were in darkness.

That's when I realized Zeke was calling for help. I ran to him, picked the bandages off the ground, and began to wrap up his hands. There was so much blood I couldn't tell where the wound was, but I cinched both bandages tight. Zeke's hair was matted to his head with sweat. A smile

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We shot down the ridge, the Engine growling like a caged bear.

was playing around his face. He stood up, holding me. Then he looked at the car and whooped for joy.

When Zeke got in and started her up, I whooped, too.

August was race season. Any kid who could escape his family snuck off at night to the white highways.

The highways have always been here. They are cracked, and full of holes, and some whole sections of bridges have collapsed. You can still ride the white highways from one ocean to another, from Canuck to Mexicana. And if you're a driver, you can race on them.

The Pro driver that first Saturday in August was a blond-haired guy from Appalachia who called himself the Bobcat and drove a blue-and-gold Ford. The local girls who'd ditched their folks were pooling in the glow of his headlights like moths, jockeying to get closer to him. The boys were standing around in tight bunches outside the light, looking at the car. Everyone was very careful not to lean on the Bobcat's car.

We watched him from a ridge above the highways. Zeke had said he wanted to size up the competition. He snorted. "I'm gonna bury this guy."

I wasn't so sure. The Bobcat wasn't famous on the Circuit, but he was still a Pro driver, and Zeke had never raced before. But Zeke was Zeke. And he was confident as hell. "Let's go," he said. I climbed in from the passenger side, and Zeke slid in the other door. He planted his big hands on the steering wheel — completely covering the channels, I saw — and his face contorted into an angry sneer like he was wrestling the Engine for control. Finally he smiled.

We shot down the ridge, the Engine growling like a caged bear, and popped through a hole in the railing. Zeke slid to a stop just behind Bobcat, his lights focusing on the blue Ford. The blond-haired driver looked at us for a moment. I thought I saw a little doubt in his face, but then he shrugged and turned back to the girls.

Zeke eased the Chevy up to the line. "Hey, piss-head," Zeke said. The Bobcat ignored us.

"I said, 'Hey, piss-head.'"

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Bobcat thumbed one gloved hand at us and asked one of the girls, "Who is this yokel?"

It was Lydia Mitchum, the preacher's daughter, who answered. "That's Zeke Landers."

The Bobcat turned to us and leaned down to look into the car. "That's it? Just 'Zeke?'"

Zeke was ready to jump out of the car and punch this guy. I looked at his wild red hair falling like a mane down his back, and I said, "Don't you know who this is, little Bobcat? This is the King of the Beasts, Zeke the Lion!"

Zeke gave me a look that told me to shut up, but the word was already out among the watchers.

Bobcat looked annoyed. "O.K., 'Lion.' What stakes are you willing to put up?"

Zeke didn't hesitate a second. "Pink slips."

"Are you crazy, yokel? You're going to go zombi for sure."

"I win, I take your Ford."

"And if I win, I take your ugly Chevy and drive it off a cliff!"

"Do what you want," Zeke said. "Down to Busted Bridge, two miles." He grinned. End of argument.

"Two miles. You're on." Bobcat pushed the girls out of the way and climbed into his Ford. Zeke and I watched him pull the inserts out of the palms of his gloves, prick the exposed skin with a small knife, and then fit his hands over the channels. He called Lydia over to tie the thongs of his gloves to the steering wheel.

Zeke snorted. "Wimp." Zeke's hands were bare as always. I pushed the handle to get out.

"Hey! Where you going?""

"I'm going to watch," I said.

"Like hell. Don't you know you're my lucky piece? You ride with me!" I got back in, scared but excited as all hell. The Bobcat started his Engine, and the crowd backed away to the railings. Zeke tightened his grip on the wheel. Our Engine growled to life.

Lydia Mitchum stripped off her green T-shirt and stood between our headlights. I couldn't take my eyes off her breasts. "On my mark!" she yelled, raising the shirt above her head. Zeke snarled under his breath. Lydia brought the green cloth down. "Go!"

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We went.

I think I screamed most of the way down the track. And then I looked over at Zeke and saw that he was smiling. Maybe I should have realized then that I had no part in this, but with Zeke so confident and in control, I started to smile, too. We beat the Ford to Busted Bridge by a quarter mile.

The Bobcat was furious. "Who the hell are you? What kind of Engine is that?" he kept yelling. Zeke told him to keep his shitty car and go home.

Zeke grabbed me by the shoulders. "So what do you say? Do we hit the Circuit, or what?"

I was young. I had just won my first race with Zeke. I said yes.

I left a note for my father telling him I would be back for the harvest in October. Then I hopped out my window, a sack of clothes in my hand, and headed out across the fields to Zeke's house. When I got there, Zeke was taking an ax to a tin contraption behind the shed. "What is that?" I said.

"His still." He broke up the last of the tubing, dumped a big barrel of mash on the ground, and then tossed the ax into the field. "Maybe this will keep him alive till I get back," he said.

We drove the white highways, getting off only when the road was too ridden with holes or the bridges were out. Zeke the Lion became the new name on the Circuit. "I refuse to lose," he'd say to me before each race. And he didn't. We drove through Kentucky, Appalachia, Texas, Misery, taking on all challenges. We would sleep outside, or in the Chevy if it was raining.

There were always girls at the races. A lot of times, I would have to walk around for a couple of hours while Zeke was using the car. Or he would gather a bunch of kids around, slowly strip off his bandages, and tell them what it was like to drive one of the Engines. Zeke loved every minute of it. I spent every minute horny as hell, but the driver magic didn't seem to rub off on me.

And Zeke was changing. By late August he was staying out later and later before each race. He'd get roaring drunk and then shake me awake. He always wanted to talk. Most of the time, it was racing: about the cars he'd beaten, or was going to beat in the next town, and especially how he was going to take on the Brujo in Mexicana.

But sometimes it was weirder stuff. "Joey," he said to me one night in Texas, "the voice is getting louder. When I start a race, I can hear it

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screaming at me. It's getting *in*, Joey." I asked him what he meant, but he only stared at his hands and mumbled again, "It's getting in; I can feel it." Then he took another slug of corn gin. After a while he shambled off into the darkness.

By September we were in Mexicana.

The Brujo was nothing like I expected. I first saw him standing near his big white Caddy, surrounded by a group of racers. He was talking in a loud, high voice, and when he laughed, he sounded like an old woman. His face was fat, and he beamed at everyone around him like an idiot.

When he saw Zeke and me step out of the Chevy, he walked over. His body was as fat as his face, much too soft for an Engine driver's. He held out a big gloved hand to me and smiled. Long leather thongs hung from the gloves. "I am Phil Mendez! You must be Lucky Joe!" That had gotten to be my name on the Circuit. We shook hands, but his eyes were already on Zeke. Those eyes were flat, professional.

His smile faded. "This is the Lion?" Zeke was in bad shape. His skin was pale from blood loss, his hands were shaky, and his eyes were bloodshot. He hadn't eaten well in days. And he was still drunk from a binge last night.

"I want to race," Zeke said. His voice was raspy.

"My friend, Zeke," the Brujo said, "you aren't well enough to shit on a rock." The Brujo's gaze swiveled back at me. "No race. Get him out of here."

"No!" screamed Zeke, and he grabbed Mendez by the shirt. "You can't chicken out on me, sucker." Mendez looked at him coldly. I suddenly realized that the Brujo was an old man, maybe older than Frank.

There was a few seconds of silence. Then the Brujo smiled. "O.K., little man. What kind of car you want to put up?" Zeke let go of his shirt, and Mendez looked over at the Chevy. He studied it for a moment, and then looked at me.

"Who painted that car?" he snapped.

"Zeke did."

"Bullshit." He walked up to the car and circled it once. "I know this pattern."

Zeke shouted at him. "So what's the deal? We race?"

"You're from up around Illini, aren't you?" I nodded. The Brujo shook his head sadly. "I thought so. I thought so." He turned back to the circle of

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drivers waiting for him by the Caddy. "O.K., little man. You get your race."

We watched the Brujo take on three challengers that day, which was almost unheard of on the Circuit. Every time the Brujo's big Caddy beat someone to the two-mile marker, Zeke would say, "I can take that. I can take it."

We were scheduled for the next morning. Racers and girls and local kids stopped by our car to wish Zeke luck tomorrow. Bottles were passed. Zeke wasn't drinking that night, but, for the first time, I was. It tasted horrible.

"I need an edge," Zeke said to me after everyone had left. He passed me a bottle. "He's got a bigger Engine in that Caddy."

"Forget it," I said. My voice was too loud. "There's no way for you to get a bigger Engine."

Zeke leaned against the hood. "Not a bigger Engine, Joey. More fuel — that's all that matters. Bigger channels."

I drained the last of the bottle. The world was spinning a little crazily, and I just wanted to lie flat on the ground. I pulled my blankets out of the car. "Sleep on it, Zeke," was the last thing I remember saying.

The next morning I woke up, and Zeke and the Chevy were gone. From the direction of the white highways, I heard the Chevy's roar, and in a second I was up and running toward the sound.

As I climbed the embankment, I could hear the Brujo's Caddy starting up. Zeke was right: it *was* a much bigger Engine. I hopped over the rail in time to see Zeke easing the Chevy up to the line.

I ran up to him, my bare feet smarting from the rubble on the highway. I looked at his hands. The bandages were off, and blood was already running down his arms. The channels in the steering wheel were nearly twice as big as they had been. His hands couldn't cover the gaps.

Zeke turned to me and smiled. "I'm gonna bury this sucker," he said. "Hop in, Joe. You're my lucky piece."

"Are you crazy?" I screamed. "Don't do this, Zeke!"

I heard the Brujo's voice. "Get out of the way, Joe. Tell Frank the Crank that I beat his son."

"What?" I turned around. I was between the Caddy and the Chevy. A big driver reached me and pulled me out of the way. The start girl raised the green flag.

The two cars took off. The exhaust smelled like sulfur.

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Since I was at the starting end of the track, I didn't see how it happened. Spectators at the far end said they saw the Brujo's Caddy was ahead the whole way, until the three-quarter-mile marker. There the Chevy suddenly put on a burst of speed and passed the Caddy. Everyone agrees that the Chevy crossed the finish line first.

Only a couple people said that they actually saw the pattern blow, or that they saw a whirlwind of light spin into the cabin with Zeke. Even the Brujo, driving right behind him, said that he couldn't be sure what happened. But everyone could hear that Engine roaring like the wind in their ears and screaming like a calf at the slaughter.

The Chevy never slowed down. It left tracks of blood on white concrete.

I hitched my way across California, Arizona, and Mexicana. Some drivers wouldn't stop for me, but the ones that did knew who I was and wanted to talk about Zeke's race. Except for my last ride, Naomi.

Somewhere in the middle of Texas, she looked at me through the rearview mirror, blew air through her lips like a baby, and then laughed uproariously.

"You scared of a woman driver, Lucky Joe?" she yelled over the roar of the wind.

Was I? Naomi was one of the few female drivers on the Circuit; she was in her mid-thirties. They made fun of her off the highways. On the highways they tried their damnedest to beat her.

I shook my head no, for safety's sake.

"You should be, Lucky; you should be. I think women are going to dominate racing soon." She must have seen my disbelief. "Oh no? Tell me, Joey. What's an Engine?"

"Everybody knows what an Engine is," I said. "A demon."

"A demon? An angry, vengeful spirit trapped in the pattern of a car." She shut her eyes to consider this. We stayed perfectly on course.

Her eyes sprang open. She smiled. "Exactly right. A demon. But what is an Engine before you trap it?"

"That's stupid . . . ," I began, but then stopped. I remembered the beauty of the whirlwind spinning inside blue circles. "I give up. What is it?"

"An angel."

I snorted. "Think about it, Joey. If you trapped a creature, made it do

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what you wanted, whenever you wanted, and then destroyed it, wouldn't you feel more comfortable calling the thing evil? Torturing an 'angel' would bring so much *guilt* to our manly drivers."

I remembered Zeke, the tracks of blood. "You don't know what you're talking about, lady. I've seen my friend . . . a guy, go zombi. That was no 'angel.'"

"Even an angel might go insane." She gestured dismissively with one hand. "And you're right: the name 'angel' is meaningless. All names are meaningless."

Naomi shut up suddenly. She was looking at me strangely. "Are you O.K.?"

I looked out the window and let the hot Texas wind blow tears off my face. Naomi drove on in silence. A long while later, when it was dark and we were halfway into Kentucky, I only asked, "So why *do* women make better drivers?"

She chuckled. "Revenge."

It was a late afternoon three days after she'd picked me up when Naomi stopped the car and let me out near my father's farm. She had driven the whole way without sleeping. The cold October wind whipped at my clothes, tugged at my bedroll. She smiled up at me.

"Here you are, Lucky Joe."

"Thanks, Naomi. I appreciate the lift."

"Anytime. Take care of yourself, now. And do me a favor: stay away from Engines. Fall in love; settle down and be a farmer."

"O.K., I promise." Then I said: "What about you?"

She patted my hand with one scarred palm. "Good," was all she said. Her eyes sparkled like no color at all. I watched her disappear before I turned my face to the wind and started down the embankment.

I walked the two miles from the highway, breathing in the familiar smells of harvest. The corn was only half-cut, though, and we were only weeks away from snow. A knot of fear cinched tight in my stomach.

I stepped up to the porch and pushed through the door. It was suppertime. The family sat at the table, my father at one end, Firstmother at the other, my two sisters and Sara in the middle. My place was empty.

My sisters swiveled in their chairs as I walked in, then quickly turned back to the table and dropped their eyes. Sara looked up, smiled slightly,

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and started to get up. Her belly was hugely round beneath her dress.

Firstmother quietly said, "No." Sara sat down awkwardly.

Father chewed slowly, his eyes on his plate.

I pulled out my chair. The scrape sounded deafening. I sat down. There was not much food on the table.

I wanted a confrontation. I wanted screaming, yelling. I wanted punishment, hard labor in the fields. They gave me silence.

When they had finished eating, each person drifted away from the table and went to their room.

Much later I heard a timid knock at my door. Just as I covered myself, Sara stepped in. She was holding a plate of beans and corn bread.

"I thought you might want some," she said.

"Thank you." I tore off hunks of corn bread and sopped them in the beans. It was delicious. Sara watched me eat.

"When is it coming?" I said after a while.

"December 23," she said. "His name will be Elijah."

"You seem pretty sure."

"I am sure. A mother knows these things."

When I finished, she took the empty plate from me and touched the back of my neck. "You'd better get some sleep."

I woke up just before dawn, feeling warm and comfortable beneath the blanket. I could hear my father moving around in the kitchen. It was time for chores, then school, and then maybe a walk with Zeke out to the City. . . .

No.

It suddenly felt very cold in the room. I pulled on my clothes and stepped out into the kitchen. The first light glowed through the frosted windows. First frost, and the crops not even half in. I heard the front door bang shut. I followed Father out into the yard.

He was gazing at the husks glistening like a glassblower's interpretation of corn. His back was stiff, straight. I stood next to him and stared into the fields.

"I know it's too late," I said, "but I would like to help."

He was silent for a long while. "What happened to Zeke?"

"He . . . died. In a wreck."

Father looked at me, his eyes squinted tight. "Ain't there something

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you should be doing?" He jerked his head toward the Landers place. "Get back here before noon, or don't come back."

"Father, I'm —"

"Go." I took off at a jog.

In the daylight the house looked like a wreck. I stepped up onto the porch, boards creaking beneath my feet, and knocked on the door. It swung open. There was no answer. I knocked again, taking a step inside. "Mr. Landers?" I said quietly. "Frank? It's me, Sam's boy, Joseph."

I walked farther into the house. The rooms were strewn with garbage, and there was a terrible stink from the kitchen. I found him in the back bedroom. At first I thought he was dead.

"Frank?"

One eye slid open, then slowly closed. I waited a minute, and then said again, "Mr. Landers?"

Without opening his eyes, he said, "I know, boy. I know. I've known for a week." His voice was hoarse.

He was drunk. I pressed on. "Mr. Landers, Zeke was in an accident." I told him what some of the spectators had said. I did not mention the tracks of blood.

Finally Frank's eyes opened again. "I *know* what happened. I felt it the minute he went. I guess you ain't so lucky after all, huh? Now get the hell out of my house."

His eyes closed again. I left.

The harvest came in, most of it. The snows came a week later, and on December 24, Sara gave birth to Elijah.

On Christmas Eve, Firstmother killed one of the chickens and wrapped it up. She handed it to me and told me to take it over to the Landers place.

"Even sinners must eat on Christmas," she told me. I headed out into the cold, the chicken heavy under my arm.

I had been visiting Frank about once a week. We had talked about everything except Zeke, and racing. So in a way we'd been talking about nothing at all.

The snow was drifted up onto the porch. There were no lights on in the house. I went in, half-expecting in each room to see Frank's frozen body curled up in a corner. The house was nearly as cold as outside. He was not home. I thought he might be in the outhouse, so I went out the back door.

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There was a light on in the shed.

I stepped into the warmth of the place. Every lantern was lit, and a fire burned in a shallow stone pit to one side of the room.

Frank was working on the Pontiac. He was moving quickly, scrubbing the old black and silver paint off the car. He had already cleared most of the hood.

When the frigid wind blasted in, he turned to me with eyes that were clear and stone-cold sober. "Shut the damn door," he said. "We've got to talk, Lucky Joe."

It was only June, but already corn crowded the embankments. Ahead of us, heat shimmered on the white highway.

The Engine roared like the wind in your ears, and screamed like a calf at the slaughter. It was a mean, rage-filled sound.

It sounded like Zeke.

Frank turned at the noise. He slammed the hood of the car down with a bang. He frowned. He looked completely calm, like the Brujo, or Naomi.

Frank the Crank was a Pro.

I was scared shitless.

"Do you think we can take him?" I said.

I could make out the shiny grillwork, the headlights reflecting like cat's eyes in the sun, the silver rectangle of windshield. The engine grew louder. The familiar patterns of the car were just becoming clear. Frank's voice was rough. "We will." He looked me in the eye. "How are *you* doing?"

"Fine," I lied.

"Bullshit, Joseph. But it doesn't matter. Just remember to concentrate."

"Frank, you. . . ."

He looked away.

". . . you should be the driver. Let me. . . ."

"Shut up, son." The car was suddenly there, bearing down on us. For a moment I thought it was going to run us down. At the last moment, the car braked hard, went into a skid, and sprayed gravel at me and Frank. The car slid to a stop with the driver's-side door facing us.

The engine wound down from a howl to a rumbling growl, and then was silenced. An ugly knot of fear tightened in my stomach. "Father, Son, Spirit, Lord. . . ," I heard myself saying, and then shut my mouth. It was too late for prayers now, and I was certainly in no position to ask.

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The door cracked open.

The overpowering smell of shit and blood nearly made me puke.

The door swung wide, and I saw first one booted leg, then another touch the ground. The thing stood up to full height and stretched its arms toward us. It cocked its head sideways and leered at us with a mouth of rotted teeth. "Joey! Poppa! Good . . . to see you!"

The thing had Zeke's voice, Zeke's wild red hair, and Zeke's broad shoulders and height.

But the shell was empty. The body was starved, the clothes ripped and soiled, the skin a sickly white.

Only the eyes — Zeke's narrow eyes — seemed animate. They flashed in the sunlight, like coals left burning during the day for the night fires.

The thing laughed.

"Aren't you . . . glad to see me?" It stepped forward, and Frank picked up a rock.

"Stay the hell away from me."

"Poppa!" The thing shut the car door, leaned against the hood. I almost gasped, the gesture was so like Zeke. The creature's gaze swung toward me. "So, Joey. What do you and this . . . piece of *shit* . . . want?"

I fought down my anger. "I want a race."

It laughed again, a dry chuckle. "A race. Joey wants to race. We haven't . . . raced together . . . in a long time."

"From here to Busted Bridge. Two miles. One shot."

The thing grinned, shambled forward. "But what are the . . . stakes? What are the stakes?"

"Pink slips," I said.

"Pink slips?" It cocked its head. "But I have no . . . *need* for a car." Then the thing smiled. "No. Not . . . a car." It touched its chest in mock deprecation. "I need another . . . vehicle." It pointed one long finger at me. Zeke's finger. "This one wears thin. You are pink . . . and *fresh*."

A thrill of terror ran down my spine. "Exactly," I said. "I want him back."

It laughed. "You want my faithful Engine?"

For the first time, its gaze fell on our car, parked behind us. It moved forward, its smell rushing before it. I felt bile burning at the back of my throat as it stepped past me. It looked cautiously at the blue circle painted around the car, then stepped over it. It held out one pale hand.

"Get away from it," Frank growled.

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Its hand hovered over the car. The thing stared intently at the patterns from hood to trunk. Then it hissed: "Who is it?"

Frank and me said nothing.

"Who . . . is it?"

Frank shrugged elaborately. "Maybe nobody you know."

"I know . . . *everyone*." It slowly touched one finger to the silver pattern painted on the hood. The grotesque face curled into an expression of surprise when the lines did not burn. "It's empty!"

"So? Do we have a deal?"

It nodded, laughing again. "It is just . . . a car!" It walked back to its car, shaking its head.

I felt Frank's hand on my shoulder. "I want you to thank your folks, Joe, for all the help they've done me."

He held out his hand. We shook, his scars feeling rough against my palm.

"Now remember. Let me do the work. It's between me and Zeke now." He smiled. Like Zeke. End of argument.

I walked to our car. A silver ox was painted on the driver's-side door. Symbol of the farmer, Frank had said. On the other side, where the creature could see it clearly, was a silver lion.

I sat down in the Pontiac, pulled the door shut, and placed my hands over the channels. A part of me wanted to cut my hands and shed some of my own blood in this race. I stared ahead through the windshield so as not to see the thing that wasn't Zeke in the Chevy next to me.

The Pontiac was surrounded by a pattern of blue paint drawn on white concrete. Diagonal lines shot off from that pattern on the side opposite the Chevy and joined to another, smaller circle. Frank sat in that circle, holding a knife. He looked at me and nodded.

I slowly turned my head to face the Chevy. I yelled, "Ready?" The thing grinned, and the Chevy Engine screamed to life.

"Start your . . . Engine!" it rasped, then threw back its head and howled.

I nodded to Frank. For a moment he looked at me. There was hope and fear in his eyes. He stared at the knife in his hand. With a quick movement, he plunged it into his chest.

The Pontiac engine roared. A wave of heat rolled up my arms.

On the pavement where Frank had been sitting, there was only an empty corpse.

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I looked over at the Chevy. "Now, you fucker!"

The Pontiac bucked and flew forward. I did not scream. I could feel a steady heat, like a murderous calm, flowing up my arms from the channels.

The white highways stretched like a snake before us. There were two miles between us and Busted Bridge, and I had never really driven before. My Engine was untested, untamed.

But it was effortless. The wheel would jerk in my hands, and suddenly we'd be skirting a pothole that I hadn't even seen. Frank's spirit gave itself up willingly, threw its entire being in the Pontiac's engine. There was not even any need to conserve anything for a second race.

The highway made a slow curve, and then the columns of Dead City were rising before us like a mountain range. After a mile and a half, the Pontiac and the Chevy were still even.

Then a searing pain in my arms nearly made me jerk my hands from the wheel. I held on. I heard the creature scream as we passed it.

We were almost to the edge of the City, when the Chevy's pattern blew. In my rearview mirror, I could see blue flames explode from the pattern on the hood. The Chevy skewed sideways across the road. The car ground against the railing, spewing sparks, and then swerved back onto the lane.

But it was not under control. The car began to spin, almost gracefully, creating bright red ovals on the white concrete. The car crashed through the opposite railing.

I yelled and slammed on the Pontiac's brakes. I nearly lost control myself before I could turn the car around. As we approached the split railing of Busted Bridge, I felt my arms go cold, and the Pontiac choked to a halt. I jumped out.

Zeke was on fire. He fled from the Chevy in a stumbling half-run, and then dropped to his knees. He looked up with pain-filled eyes and saw me.

Behind him the car exploded with a light that was no color at all.

Zeke smiled.

Father died a year later. Firstmother crumpled up with grief and followed him into the grave in six months. Sara's still a young woman, and she makes a good wife. My brothers and sisters that were her children have become my sons and daughters. Sara's pregnant with the first of

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mine, and it looks like I won't need a secondmother for many years.

Unless Lydia Mitchum ever shows up here again. She ran off about six months back from the preacher, and the rumors have been coming by about her and some woman driver. I think of her — and her green shirt and her breasts — sometimes. But not too much.

Father's land is mine now. You can make a good living off it if you're not afraid of work, and I know there will always be food on the table for the kids. I don't race anymore. The farthest I want to travel is to the edge of my acres, and only as fast as the horse pulling the plow ahead of me.

The other night I couldn't sleep, so I eased out of bed quiet enough to not wake Sara. I walked over to the Landers place in the cool night air, and I stood on the porch of the dilapidated house. I could see the two gravestones on the hill, spaced just a few feet apart.

I went around to the shed behind the house and unchained the doors. Moonlight spilled across the silver-and-black car. I rummaged around the shed awhile, looking at wrenches and brushes and rusted car parts. At one point I climbed behind the wheel and looked out through the windshield. I lightly touched the channels. The car was empty, completely empty.

When I was all done remembering, I unscrewed the caps from the kerosene lamps and sloshed liquid up and down the walls and across the car.

I stood near the back of the house. The shed burned for a long while. There must have been a big can of kerosene somewhere inside, because suddenly a whole side of the shed exploded out, and the roof tumbled down.

It was dawn before I got home. My house looked solid and clean in the growing light. Sara stepped out onto the porch as I walked up. She had a worried look on her face.

"What is it?" she asked.

I shook my head and touched her rounded belly beneath her gown. Sara said we would name him Joseph. "Nothing." It was time for the morning chores, and from inside the house, one of the children started crying.

It was a happy sound.

> *As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side. . . .*
>
> — Ezekiel 1:10

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE GREATEST CONQUEST

I HAVE JUST had a very bad month. For the first time in 52 years (!) I came down with the flu. I had long considered myself immune to it, but it finally bit me. Naturally, I was totally indignant at the ignominy of it.

As flu cases go, mine was mild — a low, short-lived fever, and none of the coughing and aches and pains that are supposed to accompany the disease. I could scarcely tell I had it.

Except for one thing. I had an overpowering sense of weakness, so that I spent weeks and weeks sleeping, or staring stupidly at the ceiling, or crawling to the bathroom.

Do you know — can you imagine — how humiliating that was and how miserable it made me? In my 51 years of literary endeavor, I had scheduled my writing tasks and set up my deadlines with the calm assurance that I would never be too sick to work every day all day. Heck, I even worked on the three occasions when I was hospitalized, though I admit I goofed off on the actual days of my operations.

But suddenly to be helpless for nearly a month! To barely be able to keep up with my mail and with my regular columns that simply had to be done even if I were dying! It was unbearable.

I'm recovered now but I'll never get over having lost a month.*

And then — do you want to hear the cherry that topped the sundae? Last Friday I went to the hospital, over my loud objections, to take "one more test." I had been there two days before for chest x-rays, echo-cardiograms, and the stealing of about six gallons of my blood, but they wanted "one more test."

It was a test that I knew would reveal nothing I didn't already know, and I said so, and I turned

* *Alas, it turned out not to be flu, but congestive heart failure. And I lost three months, not one. I apologize to one and all. I am in normal shape again.*

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out to be right, but go talk to doctors.

So I went.

As it happens, the hospital has killer elevators. The up-down indicators don't work. Sometimes they say up when they mean down, sometimes down when they mean up, sometimes both are signalled at once, and sometimes neither.

Therefore, whenever the elevator stops, the people waiting yell desperately, "Going up? Going down?" The people on the elevator invariably seem confused and have to plunge into thought to decide where they're going, and by the time they have it straight, the doors close. Also, the elevators don't necessarily stop at a floor just because you've signalled for it. They have minds of their own and go where they please.

Finally, when the elevator door closes, it doesn't do so tentatively, you can bet. It slams shut with a savage clang. (After all, the hospital is dealing with old people, with tired people, with sick people, with frightened people — why give them gentle elevators?)

In any case, I decided on one occasion that the elevator was going up, and I started to get in and the elevator closed on me, struck me when I was off balance and sent me flying, base over apex, so that I came down hard on my left hip.

I was at once dragged to the nearest doctor who ordered a left hip x-ray and found that I hadn't broken anything. (Lucky for them. Had I broken my hip I was in the mood for a law-suit. A big one.) So I went home and recovered, but suffered several days of pain that I absolutely didn't need. I don't go to a hospital in order to be assaulted with intent to destroy.

Now that I've told you all this, has it anything to do with the subject I'm going to discuss this month? Not a thing! I have gotten some fury off my chest and I am now going to discuss something as far away from the flu and from the medical profession as I can manage.

Let us consider the Earth as it was 450 million years ago or so. For one thing, it was swarming with life.

We don't know exactly how that life got started, but I'll tell you one thing — it wasn't hard. It couldn't be. The earth was less than a billion years old when primitive bacteria-like cells began to swarm in the sea. And part of that first billion years had to be spent collecting all the sizable bodies in Earth's orbit, withstanding the rain of destruction (including a possible collision with a Mars-sized body that led to the formation of the Moon) and then cooling down and gaining sufficient

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stability to be a possible home for life.

It's my feeling that life formed just about as soon as it could, so that it must have been a very natural development.

The seas and waters of the Earth generally continued to be full of life for billions of years, and slowly and gradually (though at an increasing rate) that life grew more complex. By 450 million years ago, the oceans had all the kinds of creatures we are now accustomed to find there, up to and including fish.

There was, however, no life on land.

Life formed in the sea, as easy as flip your wrist, but it did not form on land. Life developed in the sea and became more complex, but it did not form on land. Four hundred fifty million years ago, Earth was 90 percent of its present age, and life in the sea was incredibly ancient, but there was still no life on the land.

Why not?

Well, think about it. The ocean is made for life. Temperature variations over day and night, over winter and summer, over glacial and interglacial epochs, don't change very much. There is always water present, and almost always ample oxygen (after photosynthesis had been developed). There is lots of food present, too, and gravity is of no account because the buoyancy of water upholds life-forms.

It is possible for a 150-ton blue whale, the largest animal that has ever existed on Earth, to move freely through the oceans, unhampered by its colossal weight.

In the ocean, too, there is protection against harsh radiation from the Sun. A relatively thin layer of water will do the job.

Compare this with what would face life if it were to emerge on land. It would be subject to extremes of temperature such as it would never have found in the gentle sea. It would be exposed to the direct light of the Sun. It would have a problem of how to keep from losing water, drying out, and dying. It would have to fight the ever-present pull of gravity, which would be dragging it down, dragging it down. And it couldn't collect oxygen neatly out of water solution, but would have to gulp it out of dry air.

Looked at this way, it is no mystery that for 90 percent of the existence of the Earth, the dry land remained sterile. The real mystery is why it didn't stay sterile to this very moment. Why should any life forms have eventually made their way out onto dry land? What was there on dry land that could possibly entice them?

The answer, to my way of think-

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ing, was security. The seas were full, competition was terrific, life was short.

If, however, a life-form could move out onto dry land, it would find space, solitude, and an absence of predators. That's something.

For billions of years, the tides had been pushing the water up the sloping beaches and down again. Life forms were carried with the water. There was always the chance of being stranded, and life-forms that were stranded died.

However, what if, eventually, life grew complex enough so that an appropriate mutation might enable a life-form to endure the absence of water for just a bit longer than it would ordinarily be able to. It might be able to hang on till the next wave came and brought it back. I haven't the faintest idea exactly what the mutation would be; nor, I imagine, has anyone else, but it can't have been a very likely one, or it would have happened long before it did.

Little by little, as mutations piled up, life-forms might have found it possible to exist on the shore for longer and longer periods without the need of water immersion. These life-forms could not be animals, of course, for there would be nothing to eat on the sterile land. Even if they could hold out on dry land for a while, hunger would send them pushing back toward the water.

Plant life, on the other hand, doesn't need food in the ordinary sense of the term. It makes use of sunlight, plus carbon dioxide in the air (of which there was plenty 450 million years ago), plus the water that soaks the beach and, of course, the dissolved minerals in that water. What they needed, in addition, was some waterproof outer surface that would keep them from drying out in the comparatively waterless surroundings.

The first known plants capable of living on land had no roots and consisted of a simple forked stem without leaves. They did, however, possess a vascular system — that is, ducts for the transmission of water and dissolved minerals. They made their timid appearance at the edge of the shore about 450 million years ago.

With time, they developed stiffening agents that would enable them to grow upright despite the pull of gravity, and to spread parts of themselves outward to catch the sunlight they required. They had to develop roots that would hold them firmly in the ground and would absorb water and dissolved minerals from the soil.

Of course, over the course of millions of years, plants did that.

Picture the Earth as it was

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between 450 million and 400 million years ago, as the dry land turned green, and as the green spread slowly, but inexorably, along the course of rivers and into well-watered plains.

It was in a way a Garden of Eden for the plant world since for those 50 million years they were free of animal infestation. (To be sure, once animal infestation started, life schemes were evolved that made the animals useful, and even essential, to the plants.) We must also remember that the plant world competed among itself quite fiercely, if silently, growing higher, sending their roots deeper, spreading their leaves wider, always in the attempt to get more of the good things of life than its neighbors would.

Eventually, before the 50-million-year period was over, plants had become trees, and the dry land was covered with forests for the first time.

Do you see what that meant? For the first time in the history of the Earth, fire could exist. As long as the dry land was sterile, there could be no fire. Lightning existed, to be sure, and the bolts struck everywhere but ignited nothing. What was there to burn? The sea was full of life, and the living things in it were rich in carbon and hydrogen and were, therefore, inflammable — but not for as long as they remained in the sea. (Perhaps petroleum deposits on land, developed from the decay of countless life-forms in the sea, might be ignited by lightning, but that must have been rare indeed.)

The forests on dry land, however, which had built themselves up primarily of carbon and hydrogen atoms and which had discharged excess oxygen atoms into the atmosphere, finally set the stage. A lightning stroke hitting a forest tree could start a wild fire, so frightening and destructive. (It's hard to think that something as common as fire existed on Earth only in the last tenth of its existence.)

Plants could not occupy the dry land on their own forever. They represented food and, clearly, any animals that could somehow work out the necessary mutations to survive on land would have all the food they could eat.

Not easy. Plants could develop stiffening agents and become trees because they didn't have to move. Their "food" was all about them. Animals on the other hand, had to search about and find food. It wouldn't come to them. (To be sure, clams and oysters in the ocean could afford to remain motionless and allow water currents to bring them food, but the dry land isn't

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quite that user-friendly.]

This meant that animals were faced with the problem of moving about, despite the force of gravity exerted upon them. One way of diminishing the importance of gravity is to remain small. The smaller an organism is, the smaller the gravitational pull upon it, and the easier it is to operate despite the existence of that pull.

By 400 million years ago, some forms of animal life had developed the necessary mutations that made it possible for them to survive on land. All were invertebrate. All were small. The first to crawl out on dry land and to begin to feed on plant life were such life-forms as spiders, scorpions, snails, and worms. Some 370 million years ago, primitive insects appeared on land. Insects could even achieve the ultimate mobility of flight through the air — the first creatures to develop the three-dimensional life in air, the kind of life that was so commonplace in water. However, they were able to do it only because they were tiny.

To this day, land invertebrates are small. In the ocean, there are giant squid and giant clams, large lobsters and crabs, but on land, there are only occasional invertebrate specimens that are as much as a few inches across. For the most part, they are tiny. Gravity defeats them.

If we are to have *large* land creatures, then we need a stiffening material that doesn't interfere with mobility. That means an efficient internal structure of bone to which strong muscles can be attached. I don't say that that is the only conceivable way of handling the problem, but it is the only way that biological evolution has so far developed.

There were indeed bony creatures — vertebrates — in existence. They were filling the sea at the time the land was being colonized by animals. They were the fishes, who were the dominant life-form in the sea, then, as they are now.

The most successful group of fish, at the present time, are the "Actinopterygii" ("ray fins," because the fins consist of skin stiffened by horny rays). Ray fins first appeared about 390 million years ago. A second group of fish, the "Sarcopterygii" ("flesh fins") also developed. Their fins consisted of a lobe of flesh and bone, fringed with the skin and rays of an ordinary fin.

Both types of fish seem to have started in shallow water, and to have developed simple sacs into which they could gulp air from which they could absorb oxygen. Such sacs supplemented the action of gills and helped out if the shallow

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water turned brackish and muddy. They amounted to primitive lungs.

The ray fins were better adapted to sea life. They moved into the deep ocean, where the gills worked adequately and the air sac became something used only for buoyancy. There the ray fins were so successful that none of them have ever made a true advance into land life (though we hear of catfish that can stump about on land for a way).

The flesh-fins remained in shallow water, kept their lungs, and lost out in the evolutionary sweepstakes. They declined in number and variety, and few of them survive today. Nevertheless, they persisted long enough to do something marvelous.

One type of flesh-fins was the "Crossopterygians" ("fringe-fins"), who had a particularly interesting arrangement of bones in their fleshy fins, an arrangement that resembled those now found in modern land vertebrates.

Presumably, these fringe-fins could stump around on land on these sturdy little "legs" of theirs, and this came in handy. If the pond they lived in was growing too brackish or was drying and becoming too small, they could make their way overland to a larger pond, gulping air in their primitive lungs as they did so.

Naturally, as time went on, varieties developed that were more efficient at this, that could stay out of the water for longer periods, that could withstand the horrible dry-land conditions more easily.

And at some point, a fringe-fin ceased being a fish and became what we call an "amphibian." There's probably no sharp division really; these classifications are strictly human-made.

The earliest creatures that biologists are willing to call amphibian date back some 370 million years. They were the first sizable land animals to exist, the first to be able to fight gravity, not by being small, but by managing to move about (not very efficiently, to be sure) on bone-reinforced legs.

For some tens of millions of years, amphibia were the dominant life-form on land. Some species were armored and grew quite large. The largest known amphibian was "Eogyrinus" ("dawn tadpole," though it looked far more like an alligator than like a tadpole). It grew to a length of some 15 feet.

The amphibia, however, in their turn lost out in the evolutionary sweepstakes. The large amphibia declined and became extinct. By that time, amphibia of the modern type were evolving, who found survival value not in size and armor, but in smallness and obscurity. Modern amphibia are small animals

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generally — frogs, toads, salamanders. The largest amphibian species now alive is the Chinese giant salamander, which may attain lengths of three feet or a little more.

What was it that caused the amphibian failure? One of the reasons, for sure, was that they were not true land animals. They were more or less tied to the water.

Even when an amphibian in its adult stage can remain permanently out of water, there is bound to come a time when it must lay eggs, and those eggs must be laid in water. What's more, what comes out of the egg is a fish-like creature that gradually repeats the evolutionary procedure of adapting to land.

We are best acquainted with this where frogs are concerned. The eggs, deposited in water, hatch into tadpoles, little fishlike objects with gills and fins, which only gradually develop lungs and legs, and emerge on land. In fact, the very word "amphibian" means "double-life."

(To be sure, some modern amphibia have developed very ingenious methods of hatching their eggs without actually depositing them in bodies of water, but these are simply refinements of the model and not anything truly new.)

Apparently, this tie to the water is a weakness, for when a creature developed that was truly independent of water from birth to death (except for the necessity of getting enough of it to avoid dehydration) then it replaced the amphibia.

The successors were the "reptiles" ("creepers," so-called because the best-known modern reptiles are the snakes.)

What did the reptiles do? They made the greatest invention in the whole history of land life, that's all. They inherited the land as a result, and they and their somewhat modified descendants still rule it today.

The great invention of the reptiles was a protected egg, capable of being laid on land. The egg was surrounded by a shell, that was permeable to air but not to water. Oxygen could reach the developing embryo inside, carbon dioxide could be given off, but water could neither enter nor leave.

The egg is laid with a supply of water ample for the needs of the embryo till it is ready to emerge from the egg. The egg also contains an elaborate system of membranes within which wastes can be stored. One of these membranes is the "amnion." It is the most intimate of the membranes, directly enclosing the embryo.

Any life-form that lays an egg with an amnion is an "amniote." All reptiles, and all animals that have descended from reptiles, are amniotes. (Let's face it. You and I are amniotes.) The amniotes are the

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only true land vertebrates and have dominated Earth's land surface for well over 300 million years. In fact, in December 1989, it was reported that a reptile fossil had been discovered that seemed to be 338 million years old. If so, it is the oldest reptile and, therefore, the oldest amniote so far detected.

Naturally, we don't know the details whereby the amniote egg was formed. It could scarcely have happened overnight with a snap of the fingers. There must have been primitive amniotic eggs, capable of standing a little dehydration, but not too much, so that, in the course of time —

But what an invention. In my opinion, it was the greatest conquest that life made, for it meant that the dry land could be thoroughly colonized, that large vertebrates could move everywhere and were not condemned to remain near the presence of open bodies of water.

The reptiles, with their amniotic eggs, multiplied, diversified, and filled the land. They were really large. Some of them were the largest and most magnificent land creatures that ever lived. And while they ruled, no other forms of life had a chance.

We're used to thinking of birds and mammals as dominant forms of life now, but that's strictly the result of accident. The first birds developed about 140 million years ago, as slightly modified reptiles.

They were warm-blooded (as, just possibly, some of the reptiles were), and they developed the unique structures we call feathers to preserve the heat.

They survived by being small and unnoticeable and, also, by continuing to lay amniote eggs, so that they lived by the wonderful reptilian invention.

Mammals?

Well, early on in the development of the reptiles, a group of "theriodonts" ("beast-teeth") evolved. They developed mammal-like traits. They had skeletons that were quite mammalian in character, and they may even have developed warm-bloodedness and hair, though we can't tell that for sure from the fossil remains.

These "mammal-like reptiles" were, however, failures. They were mostly extinct by 170 million years ago, while the dinosaurs, thoroughly reptilian, were flourishing and triumphant.

The theriodonts didn't *entirely* die, however. Some species survived that were very small and were even more mammalian than the theriodonts themselves. In fact, they *were* mammals.

They first appeared about 200 million years ago, and they were extremely primitive and small,

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being the size of mice and shrews. In fact, the only reason they survived was that they were largely unnoticeable to the magnificent rulers of the land and because, in all probability, they multiplied at an extraordinary rate of speed.

These early mammals, you must remember, were egg-layers, like the duckbill platypus and the spiny echidna today, and the eggs they laid were, of course, amniote eggs. So though mammals were warm-blooded and had hair to conserve their warmth, they were, in fact, only slightly modified reptiles, their life made possible by the reptile-invented amniotic egg.

It was not till about 70 million years ago that mammals developed the placenta and made the first important new advance in embryonic birth since the advent of the reptiles. (The egg they produced was still amniote to begin with, however.) Even after the first placental mammals appeared, they were still small and obscure, still mouse-sized, still practicing survival through unnoticeability.

And thus it would have continued to this very day, I firmly believe. You and I would not be here, but somewhere out there newer forms of dinosaurs would be clumping, some perhaps having evolved in surprising ways we can't possibly guess at.

Except for what happened 65 million years ago.

At that time, Earth apparently suffered an impact, cometary or asteroidal, that created such havoc that there was a "Great Dying." We can't really explain why some species died out and some survived, but it certainly seems as though the large species (fewer in number and requiring more food per individual) were more vulnerable than the smaller ones.

The dinosaurs all died out, along with other giant reptiles, though some reptiles survived. Many of the small birds and mammals also survived.

When the land surface of the Earth settled down, the survivors had room in which to spread themselves. At once there was a remarkable evolutionary efflorescence in which birds and mammals seemed to try to fill the environmental niches left vacant by the dinosaurs. They grew to considerable size.

One variety of rhinoceros, "Baluchitherium" ("beast from Baluchistan"), grew to a mass of about 30 tons. The largest bird that ever lived was the "Aepyornis" ("tall bird") of Madagascar that may have reached a weight of half a ton.

These experiments in size proved failures, however. Large birds cannot fly and could not compete with larger and fiercer mammals, so

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that on the whole, the large birds were not evolutionarily successful. The smaller, flying birds proved the wave of the future.

As for the large mammals, they proved unsuccessful, too.

As it happened, the mammals had an important advantage over the reptiles over and above the existence of warm blood and a placenta. They had more specialized and better developed brains.

As long as dinosaurs existed and the mammals were tiny, their brains were not of much use to them, but with the dinosaurs gone, and the mammals increasing in size, those that made use of their growing brains rather than their growing bones and muscles gradually gained dominance.

And so here we are — thanks always to the amniote egg.

Responses to "Just Say 'No'?"

WE RECEIVED many responses to Dr. Asimov's controversial May essay, which discussed the flight from our cities and drug and alcohol abuse. The replies were very equally divided between the yeas and nays, but we have chosen to print mainly the latter, on grounds of equal time and because the letters of disagreement tended to be of more interest.

In "Just Say No!?", Dr. Asimov assumes that the reason people choose not to follow his preference and live in New York City is because they fear crime there, that the use of illegal drugs causes crime, that poverty causes people to use drugs, and that, as the logical conclusion to this syllogism, the rich should grow poorer and the poor should grow richer. This is the old liberal line, and Dr. Asimov says that he is a liberal. That he has the right to hold this opinion, I strongly affirm; he could reciprocate by affirming my right to believe in telepathy and psychokinesis, but I won't hold my breath until he does.

As for living in New York, where honest men cannot even defend themselves on the subway without being prosecuted and persecuted by the "liberal" legal establishment, of course, he can live there if he can afford the very high cost of decent housing, and he obviously can. Even if I wished, I cannot *afford* to live in New York, *even if I wanted to.* I happen to like London, Tucson, and Lima; I happen to dislike Calcutta, Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York. By preference, I like the tranquil

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life in an Ozark town. Rolla is my home town, just as New York is Dr. Asimov's home town, so I can at least partly comprehend the emotional reasons for his preference. Too, his defense of life in New York is essentially Elijah Bailey's predisposition, expressed better in *The Naked Sun,* while I would probably prefer to avoid the Caves of Steel and enjoy clean air on one of the Outer Planets, if I live long enough.

I completely agree with Dr. Asimov; I do not smoke or drink alcohol or use illegal drugs, not out of religious conviction, but because I hate to put that into my mouth which steals away my brain. Conversely, I have no objection to anyone else of legal age doing all these things, so long as I don't have to breathe his or her smoke, and so long as he or she does not try to make me pay, directly or indirectly, for self-destructive choices.

However, I, as a lower-middle-class wage earner, have had enough of throwing money at social problems. If the people of New York City want to subsidize the joys of living where they choose, they can choose to use their earnings to do so, but not a penny of mine. If Dr. Asimov wishes to invite ten or twenty homeless people into his home, feed them, give them jobs, and wean any crackheads of their folly, then I applaud him as a kind and just human being. If he brings them to my home and expects me to do likewise, I fear I will disappoint him, for there is plenty of poverty in the Ozarks, and we need to import no more. And if he wishes to throw money at social problems to see if they will go away, he may throw his own — I have very little to spare, and a jolly hard time meeting my own necessary expenses.

— John Thomas Richards
Rolla, Missouri

I read Dr. Asimov's May column with admiration. First and foremost I admire his courage and his sense of writerly conscience in addressing a serious issue in a frank and forceful way, likely to offend many. And secondly, I'm in rough agreement with the line of his argument, which I read as suggesting that we Americans need to tackle our genuine and basic problems, not the fever-dreams of a pitchman who ran the country on subterfuge and astrology.

Whether a decent future requires us all to become teetotalling health-freaks is perhaps another matter. Should I really kick my cigarette addiction for the good of the nation? After all, I also drive a car, which, like my cigarettes, vilely soils the lungs of innocent passers-by. But unlike cigarettes (or crack, for that matter), our cars seem to be ravaging the landscape, the ozone layer and our planet's climate. This seems to me a far more serious problem than any number of trumped-up Reaganite dope-wars.

Perhaps we should prohibit private cars and strongly restrict the burning of fossil fuels. But that would require a real sacrifice by literate well-to-do white people, when it's much easier to blame all our troubles on black dope-addicts. Poor ghetto-dwellers strung out on crack don't have any voice in the corridors of power, and they make convenient scapegoats.

Actually, if there's any blame to be distributed for the patent decline of our country, it clearly belongs to the rich and powerful. The rich and powerful control the American government and economy, and they make what passes for important social decisions around here. If they're loopy on dope or booze, as they often are, then they generally

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have the ability to discreetly hush it up; or, at worst, recover in the relative luxury of a Betty Ford clinic.

Nobody's gonna kick in their doors and blood-test them by force; that privilege, I suspect, will be reserved for hippies, dissidents, illegal aliens and the lumpen.

Junkies are not nice people. But I'm far less afraid of junkies than I am of the prospect of an authoritarian police force and a US Army ready to invade small countries at the drop of a sombrero. There are people around who really want this to happen. If it doesn't, then we will owe thanks to American citizens of the caliber of Dr. Asimov.

— Bruce Sterling
Austin, Texas

Dr. Asimov admits that he does not know if the people of East Germany are moving in the direction of greater freedom, or of a higher standard of living. This is precisely the failure of Liberals: not understanding that the two are related and inseparable.

Liberal law has helped make our cities dangerous and unlivable. Liberal rent-controls have frozen properties into perpetual decline. Liberal welfare has created a permanent underclass. Liberal fiscal irresponsibility, all by its lonesome, has created the near bankruptcy of not just cities, but also states like Massachusetts and New York (or are Dukakis and Cuomo suddenly Conservatives)? The result: our cities, and long before Reagan was here to blame for it.

More of the same Liberal snake oil that people have gotten so tired of! Share the wealth (just what are Eastern Europe and suburbanites fleeing from if not from egalitarian Liberal-Socialist-Marxist redistribution of what turns out to be poverty after it's been tinkered with by your friendly political boss)? Make people do what Papa Liberal knows is good for them (as announced by the brightest and most arrogant Liberals): stop smoking, stop drinking, tax and spend and elect, let paternal government share your wealth for you since WE KNOW BEST. It's all in Dr. Asimov's essay. Phooie!

It puts me in mind of the old Conservative saying: It's not that Liberals are ignorant; it's just that they know so much that simply isn't so. Liberalism, along with its siblings, Socialism and Marxism, are ideas whose times have come and, mirabile dictu, gone. A revised quotation from the Liberal era: we have seen the (leftist) future and it sucks! Ask anyone in Europe, or fleeing from our major cities.

— Peter H. Vennema
Lafayette Hill, PA

For me to make any kind of reply to your essay in the May issue just isn't possible. All I can say is that if certain candidates had some of the fire, commitment and calm reasoned smarts that you show in that essay, the Democratic party would not be in the trouble that it's in (at the national level).

You are sure to get lots of negative mail from the troglodytes. Remember how the composer Max Reger responded to his critics: "I am sitting in the smallest room in the house. I have your critique before me. Shortly it will be behind me."

— Al Zelaya
Morristown, N.J.

My husband and I are middle class small business owners. I am a smoker and enjoy a social drink now and then.

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We live in the country in a modest home and our children go to a fine, small town school. I believe that we are living the "American Dream." We have worked very hard to accomplish what we have and will work just as hard to expand our business so that we can enjoy our lives even more. As we do this, we put more and more breadwinners on the payroll. Now, we could be taxed even more than we already are, in which case the government could give the poor, non-working people more money to live more comfortably. Of course, in order to pay those taxes we would not be able to expand our business, putting potentially productive people out of work. But why should they care? If the ones who do work have to share and share alike, why work? In fact, it sounds a lot like those countries whose people are complaining of shortages and non-productivity, doesn't it? Why do you think that this country is the richest in the world? Why do you think your parents moved to this country? It is because anyone who wants an education can get one. Anyone who wants to work can find a job. Some people will scoff at those statements and say, "What does that white, middle class woman know about the poor finding jobs and getting a decent education?". Well, I lived in the city and there were hundreds of businesses looking for clean, hard-working people to employ. A limited education is free, and scholarships and student loans are available to anyone who wants to pursue them.

I believe that we should take care of the sick and elderly. We could do that much more effectively if we could get the lazy, able-bodied off our welfare rolls.

Drinking and smoking are vices which we could all do without. I believe that there should be stiff penalties for those who endanger others' lives while using alcohol. I believe that smokers should be segregated from non-smokers. I also believe that if this is to remain a free country, those of us who choose to indulge in these vices should have the right to do so.

— Debbie Richardson
Montague, California

Isaac Asimov is a compassionate and concerned man, and the social ills he describes are real enough. Unfortunately, his prescription seems to be more of the same medicine that has not only failed to cure, but has largely brought the trouble on.

Statism may conceivably work in small, homogeneous countries — though Sweden is now on the verge of bankruptcy and Britain was headed for the Third World before the Thatcher cabinet put on the brakes. It is totally inappropriate to the huge, heterogeneous USA. The New Deal did not ease the Depression; after a brief upturn, our economy went downward again until World War II. Having spent billions of dollars and caused an amount of disruption and heartbreak that social scientists were appalled to measure, Urban Renewal triumphantly presented us with several thousand fewer housing units than we had before. The welfare system has demonstrably undermined or destroyed family life, especially among the black poor, and created a permanent underclass. The more public money we pour into education, the worse its performance. Small businesses collapse under a load of regulations, paperwork, and taxes with which big corporations readily cope while milking us for subsidies

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and cost-overrunning contracts. The campaign against drugs, costly, futile, and erosive of everybody's liberties, likewise comes to you courtesy of your government.

Changes made under the Reagan administration were actually slight, but to the extent that they favored freedom, beneficial. Though the rich did get richer, so did the majority of the poor. The defense buildup broke Soviet will. The trade imbalance is a bugaboo.

What we need is not less individualism but more. Why not make direct cash payments to the needy, to spend as they see fit. Why not issue vouchers for schools? Why not let adults (I agree that children need protection) ingest whatever they wish, but leave the results to private philanthropy and Darwinian selection to cope with? Why not put people back in charge of their own enterprises and lives? Unlike most intellectuals, I have some confidence in the intelligence and decency of the average person.

It is ironic that, at a time when the shackles are falling off abroad, our politicians want to fasten new ones on us.

— Poul Anderson
Orinda, California

I was very disturbed after reading "Just Say No." You seem to be implicitly advocating a Communistic society through a massive redistribution of the wealth produced by a few and giving it to the many. (The aberrant system practiced by the Russians and the Chinese are tyrannical dictatorships and can only be called communistic by someone using George Orwell's doublespeak.) The early English settlers tried to establish a communistic society in Virginia based on the principle "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." The colony almost perished until Captain John Smith established a new system, "He who does not work, does not eat."

A few years ago the Club of Rome predicted that our current society would collapse within the next century and that it was already too late to prevent the collapse. They listed several possible causes including Population, Pollution, Energy, Resources, and Food. They were unable on the basis of their computer simulations to decide which of these factors would be the final straw. My personal choice is Population, since uncontrolled population growth exacerbates all of the other difficulties.

Numerous studies have shown that when any animal population exceeds the carrying capacity of an ecosystem, the animals begin to act in erratic and irrational ways. In the case of Homo Sapiens, this trend is beginning to show up in the crowded conditions in our major cities. People need a minimum amount of personal space. This is one of the major reasons why public transportation has been unable to replace private cars for the movement of people around relatively short distances in a local area. The only way that the irrational behavior of the animals can be corrected, is by reducing the number of animals per unit area. Unfortunately this solution is unacceptable. It has been estimated that if the present rate of population increase continues the population of the earth will reach 10 billion by the year 2050. If the population does reach this level our current problems will increase exponentially. It may already be too late to prevent the inevitable collapse of our current civiliza-

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tion because most of the population increase is occurring among those least able to take care of himself or herself let alone contribute to the progress and welfare of the society as a whole.

We are currently experiencing a worldwide example of the "Tragedy of the Commons." When an area is owned in common and used by all, all will use it as if it were their own, but no one will assume the responsibility for the preservation and protection of the commons. At first the commons were local, then statewide, then national, and now worldwide. As a result we have polluted our common stock of water, land, and air so that life is no longer tolerable in the major cities of the earth.

As a result the only rational behavior available to those who have the ability and the resources is to flee the central city and go to the suburbs where an acceptable quality of life is still possible. As those with the ability and resources flee to the suburbs, life in the central cities for those who remain becomes even more intolerable. Because of their increasing misery, it may well be that the only behavior available to them is to try to deaden their sense of misery and hopelessness by resorting to alcohol, drugs, and sex. They cannot just say no.

For those of us who can flee to the suburbs, we can only say with Rhett Butler: "I want peace. I want to see if there's something left in life of charm and grace."

— Robert W. Sandberg
Appleton, Wisconsin

I would like to thank Dr. Asimov for his essay "Just Say 'No'" in the May issue of F&SF. It is so extremely rare to have someone outline the drug issue (or any other issue for that matter) with such sanity and clarity, and in a plain-speaking manner with a minimum of rhetoric, that you will undoubtedly be flooded with angry letters provoked by the Good Doctor's refusal to toe the politically acceptable line of hysteria. Both you and he should consider such a response as a tribute: maybe for every ten letters you receive, one person will have been started on the road to clear thinking.

Congratulations.

— Edward R. Fitzgerald
New York, N.Y.

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Gregg Keizer ("Unlike Cortez," F&SF, January 1984) lives in northwest Louisiana where he is publisher for a software company. He writes that this story grew from his fascination with the contradictions of South Africa — the heartlessness of apartheid within a people who believe so strongly in their religious faith, the natural beauty of a country that suffers internal corruption.

Days of Miracles and Wonder

By Gregg Keizer

HE KEPT THINKING of the pump back at the farm, imagining it apart and spread out in front of him. Visser's voice brought him back to the bushveld heat.

"This way, Piet," Visser said, and pointed at a spot in the grass. Though Piet stared hard, he didn't see the track. Visser's voice rose high, then tumbled as it cracked on. "The Bantu came this way. See here?" Piet shrugged his shoulders. His sixteen-year-old cousin had the land sense, not him. "He turned and climbed up there." Visser gestured toward the top of the rise. "He's heading back for the Limpopo."

"You're sure?" Piet asked, still looking at the grass, but seeing the work waiting for him back home instead.

"Can't see it at all, can you?" Visser asked. Piet looked at his cousin and smiled.

"You're the Boer, not me," Piet said. Visser stiffened just the slightest. The boy angered when called a farmer, as if there were something wrong

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with it, or the land. But Visser said nothing. Instead, he hefted the tracking laser to his shoulder and started up the slope. Piet picked up the bustergun — the light weapon all plastics and silicon chips — and followed.

Visser was lying on his stomach when Piet reached the top of the rise. "Told you one was here," Visser whispered, and pointed with the laser. Piet bent down to the bustergun's sight.

The Bantu was at least half a kilometer away, knee-deep in the grass. In the sight's magnification, Piet could clearly see the black's face. He's not much older than Visser, Piet thought. He shifted his sight and noticed the Bantu carried a heavy ruck on his back.

"Watch," Visser said quietly, as if the Bantu could hear. Piet heard the whine of the laser as Visser switched it on. "Launch," Visser said. Piet did nothing. "Press the trigger," Visser said, his voice louder.

Piet closed his eyes, just for the quickest breath, then reopened them and pulled the trigger. The bustergun jolted under his chin, and the smart dart sailed across the veld. Piet raised his head and watched. The dart poked through the ravine below, then turned and curved as the ground swelled at its left, picking up some speed as it crested the lip of the ravine.

"Come on, come on," Visser said. Piet glanced to his cousin, then watched as Visser painted the Bantu with the red laser light. The Bantu had seen the dart, for he dodged and pivoted by turns, first up on his feet, then down in the grass almost hidden, but the ruck plainly slowed him down. Visser was good, Piet thought, knowing his cousin's agility was far better than his own, knowing that he would never have been able to keep the laser light fixed on the target. But that wasn't the only reason Visser held the laser — Piet was honest enough with himself for that.

"Bang bang, Bantu," Visser was saying. Piet bent down to his bustergun's sight and saw the laser red splash across the Bantu's shoulder, then wipe itself over one cheek and into an eye. No time to be blinded by the light, though, for the smart dart was there and exploded in a fine flame. Half a heartbeat later, a secondary explosion roared into the cloudless sky, followed by two more, smaller detonations. The blast waves rocked the grass in front of Piet's face.

"Uitgeskop," Visser yelled.

The cloud of smoke where the Bantu had stood shredded in the breeze. Nothing left for the dogs this time. Piet stared down at the bustergun he

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held. The weapon was for armored helicopters and thin-skinned personnel carriers, not Bantu. But Visser had insisted they use the thing today, not their usual snipe rifles.

"He was carrying plastique," Visser said. "That's what made him explode like that." Piet nodded dully, feeling no pride, not even when the Bantu was such an obvious terrorist.

The two of them stood, Visser holding the laser under his arm, and Piet shouldering the bustergun. The distant heat waves fluttered in the air, and Piet wiped his forehead with his free hand. Visser pulled a small notebook and pencil stub from a pocket on his shorts.

"One today, two yesterday, one the day before," he said, scratching on the paper for a minute, then returning it to its place. Visser closed his eyes briefly, and Piet knew he was figuring the bounty. Ten rand times four. "Forty rand," Visser said finally.

"You can have my share," Piet said, like he always did.

Visser nodded, as if he expected it. "That makes just over three hundred we've got. If they keep coming like this, we'll be able to buy vanderLinden's three hundred acres in no time." Piet glanced north, past the place where they'd sniped the Bantu. Zimbabwe — what was left of Zimbabwe — lay north of the slow Limpopo a couple of kilometers away. Visser still called it Rhodesia like his father, Piet's uncle and boss. Whatever you called it, there was barely enough to pin a name to.

Blackened ground stretched into the heat waves across the river. Piet had been in Rotterdam, just getting ready for the second year of university, when the jets dropped the fire flechettes into the refugee camps packed along the frontier, but he remembered the pictures in the magazines. Better yet, he remembered the shots his father's CNN crew had made, the scenes when the camera vibrated, his father's voice trembled, and the tangled slums on the screen turned to flame. And the last moments on the video were the best-remembered of all — the burned bodies, the white-eyed survivors that had surrounded his father and his off-camera crew, and the silent madness in their black faces as they beat his father with their fists and tattered arms.

He'd caught the first flight home when he'd heard, but by the time he'd got to Jo'burg, the fire planes had made a second run. All the reconnaissance teams found a week later was the fused metal housing of his father's camera and its precious video, miraculously intact.

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That had been a long ways away, clear down near the Kruger National Park, but he imagined it here with no trouble. Part of the soot a dozen kilometers away might as well be his father.

"Home now?" Visser asked. Piet half-heard the words as he stared across the Limpopo. He shook his head, wiped his free hand on his shorts. He'd been the one to say they should walk the frontier today, though there was plenty of work at home. Piet felt sweat edge down his neck and onto his shirt, and wanted cold water pouring over him. And now that they were here — even though they'd killed a Bantu — he didn't want to leave. He had the sudden urge to run to the river and swim through its muddy waters. Such a strange feeling, he thought, for the frontier had always made him uneasy.

Visser asked again, and this time Piet nodded. Visser turned and headed down the slope, whistling out of tune. Once the Limpopo was out of sight, the teasing in his mind faded, and after a few moments, his thoughts returned to the Bantu and Visser.

The boy bothered Piet more and more. Little things mostly. Using the bustergun, for one. A snipe rifle would have been much more economical — there were only so many smart darts left, after all. A waste on just a single Bantu.

Not that Piet didn't understand why the Bantu couldn't be let back into the Afrikaner Free State. Once pushed out — that was the only thing Afrikaners could do ten years ago when it looked like the Bantu would take over, destroy what had taken centuries to build — they had to be kept out.

This is ours, Piet thought, and looked at the flat-topped *kops* around them. We made our Covenant with God along the Blood River, and He gave us the land to make His. Promises by both God and man had been kept. What was destined and ordained had come to be. We turned this country into something God, and a white man, could be proud of.

But there'd been nothing in the Covenant about incinerating 3 million Bantu shoved across the borders. Nothing about cremating another million two months later, when armies from four nations ranged along the frontier.

They walked the five kilometers to the farm, Visser whistling all the while. Piet was glad they found no more Bantu tracks.

Visser stopped when they stood on top of the rise overlooking the

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white buildings of the farm. The boy raised the laser. Humming, he switched it on and painted a Coloured girl crossing the courtyard from the house to the first fence. She didn't notice, Piet saw, when Visser splashed the light over her thighs. Piet didn't have to look through the bustergun's sight to see the light wiggle there on the girl he knew was Darla Reitim.

"Stop it," he said.

Visser looked up. He pointed to the girl, who was just checking through the first gate, her fingers stretched out for the print lights to read. Her long hair, blonde like every Coloured's, waved in the breeze. Way too blonde. "Dark enough for a Bantu, isn't she?" Piet said nothing, and his cousin pouted for a moment. "Not doing anybody harm," Visser said. But he switched off the laser.

Piet led the way through the sensor field. Today the path ran almost straight to the outside gate. The three-meter fence sparked now and then, and the smell of ozone was almost overpowering. Piet raised his hand to the print lights and let them wash over his fingertips. Chimes sounded, and the fence quit humming. Darla was waiting for them on the other side of the gate.

"Father Niese said to come bring you in," she said, her Afrikaans delicate and pure, even though she was Indian. "He needs you right way," she said, looking at a spot directly between them.

"Wait till he hears what we got today," Visser said, starting to brush Darla aside.

"Not you, Mr. Niese," Darla said, still not looking at them. "You, Mr. DeJong," she said. "Father Niese says to please hurry. He says it's more than urgent."

Piet handed the bustergun to Visser. "What's wrong?" he asked, almost saying her name, too. That would have been a mistake, calling a Coloured by name rather than station.

"Father Niese didn't say," Darla said, then paused and looked over her shoulder. "You should know, Mr. DeJong," she said. "They brought in a bla— they brought in a Bantu an hour or so ago."

"So?" Visser asked.

Darla glanced up at Piet for just an eye blink. "Not dead, Mr. DeJong. She's living still."

Piet looked to the house beyond the wire. Why alive?

"She's still alive," whispered Visser, grinning. He flicked the laser

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back on and painted the thick front door on the house a hundred meters away.

"THEY FOUND her hiding in one of the kraals up north. She was trying to steal a calf." Piet listened to his uncle's deep voice, but paid more attention to the battered face on the black woman shivering in the plush chair. "The Coloureds did that to her," the old man said. His fingers stretched out and rubbed the bruised face.

Beneath the damage already done, the woman was beautiful, a richer, darker version of the Molucca girls he'd discovered along the docks in Rotterdam. A Bantu was always a Bantu — he'd heard those words a thousand times from his mother's brother. But the words couldn't mean this one, Piet thought. No one would try to kill this. Piet tried to find his voice, but before he did, Visser asked his question for him.

"So why did they bring her here?" Visser leaned the laser against a table. Jan Niese scowled, but said nothing. "Why didn't they just kill her?" Visser asked. Piet watched his cousin lick dry lips. He's only sixteen, Piet reminded himself. Hormones amuck, he would leap on anything with hair longer than his own.

"She said she has something to sell," Father Niese rumbled. "Tell them," he said to the Bantu woman. "Tell them just what you told me."

The woman shook her head, then nodded, then shook her head again. She touched a hand to her ear, and Piet saw blood on her fingers when she pulled them away. Part of him wanted to help, but most of him knew better. He stayed put.

"Across the line," she started, her Afrikaans almost too thick with some strange accent for Piet to follow. "Across the black line. They're coming across the line soon. Maybe in four, five days. Maybe day after that. But soon."

Piet looked at his uncle, who shrugged. "That's all she said to me," Father Niese said. "And that she wants her life to tell anything more."

Visser stepped forward and slapped the Bantu's face. The sudden fury of it took Piet by surprise. The only thing in his mind was the girl's face rocking back from Visser's blow.

As quickly as Visser struck the Bantu, Piet struck Visser. The boy's back was turned, and a fist behind the ear drove him to the floor. But when Piet raised his hand to hit his cousin again, Father Niese grabbed him,

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twisted his arm behind his back, and shoved him against the chair the girl sat in.

"Look at you!" the old man yelled, and Josh, the Coloured man who always kept by Jan Niese, stepped into the room. Niese waved him away. "You're both too stupid to live, did you know that?" Niese glared at his son. Visser had managed to sit up against the wall, one hand held behind an ear. Piet thought he saw some blood. "Why do you think she's still alive? So she'll tell us what she knows, that's why."

Then the old man turned to Piet, who had picked himself from the floor and stood a bit unsteadily beside the Bantu girl. "And you, you know better, don't you? This isn't Jo'burg, is it? This isn't Rotterdam. You're not some Uitlander hot after some Kaffir with black tits, are you?" Piet shook his head, as much to the accusation that he was an outlander, a foreigner, than anything else. The old man could see through anything. "Remember that, then, would you please? You're the one who's so terribly bright."

Niese motioned to Josh, and the Coloured man tossed a small sack into the girl's lap. Coins jaggled when she opened the sack and fingered its contents. Look greedy, Piet thought; make me hate you. But the girl's face was still beautiful.

"Fifty rand," Niese said.

Her voice was soft and rhythmic even through the rough accent. "The other part?"

"You'll just have to trust us." The old man's smile was toothy. Piet knew that smile, and knew it was genuine and false all in the same instant. But he wouldn't cross his uncle, not even for this Bantu.

The girl took her time. Visser stood up, wiped the blood on his hand across his thigh. Piet looked down at the girl, at the shape of her cheek, at the gathering of the khaki material between her breasts.

"They're coming," she said. She looked up at Piet, then her gaze switched to Visser.

"You already said that," Visser said. Father Niese hissed him quiet.

"They're like locusts. They'll sweep across the black line and consume you."

"Who are they?" Niese asked.

"Millions. Millions like me," the girl said. Piet had to look away, for she had turned her head to look at him and locked her eyes on his. Why is my heart thundering like this?

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Visser laughed, short and sharp. "Millions? There aren't millions of you left, are there?"

"I told you to keep quiet," Niese said softly to his son. He looked at the Bantu, then knelt down beside her chair and placed a hand on her arm. "Who are they, girl? More soldiers from Zaire?" She said nothing. "Farther north?" the old man asked. "Not Arabs, are they? Surely not."

The Bantu shook her head. "No, like me." She touched her face with a finger, making a motion like she was wiping something across her cheek. She began talking in Fanagalo, the pidgin language, the words spilling out so fast that they seemed a single stream. Piet understood only tiny pieces, and from Visser's face, his cousin followed none of it. The old man understood, though, for he nodded his head as the Bantu spoke. The stream slowed, and he interrupted her by holding up a hand.

"She says now she was sent across the frontier before the rest follow along," Niese said. "So much for stealing cattle. She says they're going to smother us like the grass on the earth. She says—"

But the Bantu spoke up again, back in Afrikaans. She looked first into Father Niese's eyes, then up into Piet's. Her smile, ruined only by a swollen lower lip, made him smile back. "You can't do anything about it now," she said. "Telling you won't change what will happen." Her fingers touched her lip gently. Piet watched her fingers, her lips, then closed his eyes for the briefest moment. Lust was something Visser showed, Piet told himself. Not for me. Not for a Bantu. Not here.

"All those you killed so long ago," the Bantu said. "Millions and millions. Remember?" Piet didn't notice that he was the only one who nodded. "They're coming back home," she said. As she spoke, his father's face came to Piet's memory. Piet closed his eyes again, to make the image go away.

Father Niese broke the long quiet. "You mean those we out-kicked are going to return?"

Visser put it into plainer words. "Ghosts. You're talking about ghosts walking across the frontier." He paused, and pointed his index finger at the Bantu. "Ghosts scaring us into handing everything to them. Isn't that right? Ghosts!" Visser laughed, first softly, but then, when his father picked it up, louder. Josh joined in next, and the room was filled with the humor.

Piet listened, and realized that he was the only one not laughing.

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Other than the Bantu. She smiled at him again, and began laughing, too.

"This country stinks," Visser complained. The boy adjusted the strap holding the laser across his shoulder, shifted the snipe rifle to his other hand, and kicked another plume of dust into the air with his boot.

Piet coughed in the dust, half-wondering whose ashes he was breathing in. "You're just imagining that," he told his cousin. Piet didn't quite believe his own words, for the odors he'd smelled the past three days made him want to wash his face over and over.

Now he wished he hadn't told Father Niese he wanted to take the Bantu and cross the Limpopo into the dead lands. It had sounded like such a good idea then, while he had looked at the Bantu and feared someone would kill her if he didn't find a way to use her. Then, when Father Niese agreed but said to take Visser along, Piet had been glad. Now he wasn't so sure.

He glanced over Visser's head, counted the seven Coloureds stretched in a line in front of them, and made sure the first two walked on either side of the Bantu girl. Xohosa, she said her name was, though that was too odd for Piet's comfort, so he called her Autjies, after the actress. Giving the Bantu a proper name somehow made her less black. But not white enough not to feel uneasy whenever he thought of her.

Piet adjusted the bustergun slung across his back, and hoped the dust of Autjies' people wasn't getting in the electronics. He gripped his snipe rifle a bit tighter against the sweat coursing down into his hands. The Coloureds all carried *sowetos*, the stubby barrels like surprised mouths. Clouds of slivers rushed from those mouths when triggers were pressed. The weapons were perfect against huge groups. Maybe Xohosa's — Autjies's — ghosts ran in the same mobs their real-life makers had years before. If so, the Afrikaners were ready.

"There's nothing here," Visser said. The boy shook his head quickly, and drops of sweat flew. "Three days across the frontier, and this is all." He kicked at the dusty ground. "The only Kaffir we've seen is her," he said, and pointed toward Autjies. "Look at her. Look at her, would you?"

Piet looked up and over Visser's shoulder as the boy's voice changed. "Like a Coloured, I bet," Visser said. His voice was thicker now. "Move like a Coloured under you, but quicker, maybe. More fun, maybe."

"More enthusiastic?" Piet asked sarcastically, but Visser didn't catch it, or if he did, didn't say.

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"Yeah, more enthusiastic." The word rolled from his tongue. Piet said nothing in return, and after a few moments, Visser stopped and turned. "We could switch off, you know. You could go first if you want." The boy grinned. "Age before experience, right?" The pause was empty, and Visser's grin drifted away. "Just talking about it. What's with you, anyway? Just be sport, that's all."

Visser's upper lip dripped sweat. Piet licked his own from around his mouth. Time to get this out — they'd danced around it the past three days, and it had chased away his dreams of Molucca girls the past two nights. "Don't touch her, Visser," he said.

The boy's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. ". . . tell me what to do . . . ," Visser said, the beginning of his sentence disappearing in two sharp bangs, the end vanishing under two heavy thumps. Piet froze, clicked home the snipe rifle's magazine, but all he saw were twin pillars of smoke. Then small, bloodied chunks pattered in the dust. Ripped cloth fluttered down a few moments later. Two of the Coloureds, the ones third and fourth in line, were gone.

Visser beat Piet to the ground, but it was Piet who yelled to the Coloureds to cover. A bit slow, they found the dirt, too. The two up front flung the girl down and behind them. From the corner of his eye, Piet saw Visser fumble with the laser and switch it on. Piet didn't think there would be anything to shoot, and left the bustergun tight on his back.

"Shotmines," Visser said quietly, as if their enemy were close enough to hear. Piet nodded. Step on one, and its first small charge rocketed a needle-like piece of plastique up into the body. A second later the plastique blew you into a thousand parts. Nothing left, hardly enough to make the carrion come. Neat and clean, death an Afrikaner could be proud of, Piet thought. So what was it doing here, so far across the frontier?

Piet didn't mourn for the two Coloureds, for they were almost nameless to him, as much as the passing of their only radio. One of the Coloureds had been carrying it in his ruck. He and Visser had talkies in their rucks, but the things would carry just a few kilometers, not all the way home.

They lay there, all eight of them, long enough to see the shadows change slightly. Finally Piet thought it was safe, that there were no shotmines on delayed action here. With no smellers in their rucks, the only thing they could do was retrace their steps. The two Coloureds and Autjies

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stepped carefully across the torn earth where the shotmines had been hidden.

It was only an hour after they'd walked in their old prints that they turned to the west and north and Visser spoke. "They must have been planted a long time ago," he said. He nodded to himself, then went on. "That's it: they're real old, and no one dug them up ever. That's possible, isn't it? Those shotmines were ours, from before the Uitgeskop. Weren't they?"

"Sure. It's possible," was all Piet could come up with. But an image came to him then — the Bantu exploding in such a fine flame four days before. The Bantu had been carrying shotmines in that immense ruck of his, Piet thought; it was shotmines that had exploded when the smart dart caught him. But why was a Bantu planting sophisticated Afrikaner mines in ground where no Afrikaner ever came? Where none, as far as Piet could tell, had been since the virulent firebombs tumbled from the jets? A quick vision of his father, face turned up to the sound of engines, came and went. Piet decided not to share his suspicions with his cousin. The boy would only worry the curiosity until he drove Piet crazy.

They kept moving closer and closer to true north as the dusk filled the shallow valleys and reached for the tops of the occasional hills. When Piet finally said they could stop, the Coloureds stacked their *sowetos* neatly beside Visser and moved off to make their own meal. The Bantu Autjies settled herself against a large rock and seemed to be eyeing the weapons.

"Take out the magazines," Piet told Visser. The boy grunted, then stripped the *sowetos* of their ammunition and tossed it all into a bag he pulled from his ruck.

Visser made supper, a dried paste that turned itself into eatable stew after he added water and threw in two heater caps. The water boiled, Visser stirred the mess in its pot, and the two of them shared the one spoon. Piet could smell the curry from the Coloureds' fire a hundred meters upwind. He licked the spoon one last time.

He lay back and smoked one cigarette, then another. Autjies stirred across the small cleared space, and he lifted his head to look at her. She was so . . . he searched for the right word. Beautiful, he thought, though that wasn't a word one would stick onto a face as dark as hers. Strong, his uncle would probably say. Visser wouldn't have a word for it at all: he'd been only eight when they shoved all the Bantu out of the country, only ten when they flew the airplanes and dropped the bombs; had never been

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out of the country, had never had a woman smile at him who wasn't white.

"I'm hungry," she said, her eyes locked on his. He found it disconcerting.

Visser rummaged in his ruck and, after a moment or two, tossed a small package to her. He followed it with a small water bottle. No heater caps or pot, though, and so Autjies was forced to mix the water in the package, shake it up, and eat it cold.

As she finished, Visser pulled a long length of liteCable from his ruck and went to her. Piet stood, too.

Visser glanced back. "It's my turn to do this," he said. A whine had crept into his voice. Piet shook his head and pulled the cable from his cousin's hands. It took a long stare to make the boy back away. When he finally did and returned to the fire, Piet bent down and looped the cable around Autjies's ankle, flexed it quickly, and made sure it tightened down on her skin. Nothing could cut the cable short of a laser.

"You don't have to tie me like this to make me stay," the girl whispered. Piet looked down into her dark, dark eyes. Her fingers brushed against the cable, then traced it to his hand. He pulled away only after he'd felt her touch.

"Damn you," he whispered back. "Damn you, damned Bantu." The word was out before he could stop it, and he was sorry as soon as it reached her ears. Her face, creased by a white, white smile only a moment before, went blank. Piet tried to shake it off saying, "Play with the boy if you have to play with one of us. Leave me be. I've enough problems without you." The words rushed from him.

He whirled and stalked back to the fire and Visser. It was getting dark, and her face was melting into the night. Visser was babbling beside him. Piet wiped the sweat from his eyes, hoping that would make him see in the darkness. She was just as invisible as before.

"... Father never said you could tell me what to do," Visser was saying. "That Bantu is just as much mine as yours."

"Shut up," Piet said quietly.

"You're just a cousin, hardly even blood. You're barely Afrikaner; you're just a city boy. Stadskalant," Visser accused. "You're like a Hollander, too soft for it here. You're soft for the damned Bantu," Visser's voice rose.

"I . . . told . . . you," Piet shouted, and reached across the fire, felt the flames along the bottom of his arm, grabbed hold of Visser's shirt, and yanked the boy through the fire, sparks flying and swirling in a column

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The sound divided and divided again until it was a million voices.

high above the dead earth. Visser cried out as Piet dragged him from the flames and shoved him deeper into the night. "I told you to shut up!" Piet yelled. Visser rolled in the dirt, hands beating at his smoldering clothes.

Panting hard, Piet tried to regain some control. His head spun slowly, and he wiped the sweat from his eyes again. In the silence then, just over the shuffles of the Coloureds beyond the firelight, he heard the girl.

"You don't know anything," she said, almost laughing. "You can have me if you want; you both can. First one, then the other. I don't care." Piet squinted into the dark and had to tug on the cable anchored around the boulder behind him to convince himself she was still really there. "Kill me like you killed all the others. Set me free; let me bring ten others here."

Off in the far distance, as if it were a thousand kilometers away, Piet heard the wind sough gently. But it wasn't the wind, was it? For just a flashing second, the sound divided and divided again until it was a million, 2 million, 3 million voices. Children's, women's, men's voices. All mashed and smashed together to make the wind. Piet shook his head. Visser moaned close by.

"Kill me, and there will be another ten to take my place," Autjies said. No, Piet thought, that wasn't her name. Call her what she is — Xohosa the Bantu. Her voice became a taunt in the darkness. "Can't you do that, baas? Can't you kill me? You killed so so many, just one more." She laughed. Piet listened to it and thought of his father, trapped by the bombs because he was filming refugee camps teeming with people like Xohosa, What difference could it have made if Americans had missed five minutes of starvation on their televisions? What difference?

"God cannot stand the sight of you," she said. Her voice was loud now, the laughter gone. "You are a sore on the world."

No matter how hard he wiped away the sweat from his eyes, he could not see her in the dark. Only her voice was there.

"He's turned his back on you, you know," that voice said. Piet thought of Molucca girls and the voices they'd used along the waterfront in Rotterdam. "He's revoked the Covenant."

In the background, Piet thought he heard the voices sough in the wind.

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He made his voice strong. "We are Africans. This is our land. Not yours."

"God wants it back," she said. "He has seen what you have done, and He will wipe it clean of you." She paused for a breath's moment, and the wind's voices filled the silence. "Kill me and find out. Ten will take my place."

"We are the Chosen People of Africa," Piet finally said to the darkness. All he got for the words was a laugh from the Bantu.

"Chosen? You cannot even keep your hands off Bantu skin. The only African thing God gave you is what I've got between my legs. It's all you've ever wanted, isn't it?"

Piet moved away from the fire that had suddenly made him too hot. The wind spoke, but there was no breeze to cool his face.

"You want to see what your God thinks of you, do you, baas? You think you can stand that, baas? Then kill me; kill me and watch Him spit on your whiteness."

"Are you going to let her talk like that?" asked Visser from the other side of the fire. Piet sensed the Coloureds standing just outside the light, watching, waiting. "Kill her if that's what she wants," Visser shouted.

"Yes, kill me," Xohosa said. "If you can, kill me." The wind sighed again in Piet's ears, a deafening roar; and the salt of his sweat blinded his eyes. "But that's not what you want, is it, baas?"

"Do it!" screamed Visser through the flames. "Do something!"

And Piet reached for the cable around the rock, and reeled it in like he was pulling in a handline, fighting fish on the other end. When she came to him, digging her heels in the dust, he felt only a heaviness in his legs and arms. When he threw her down on her back and ripped the thin khaki she wore, he thought only of the long white searing that had charred the camera beside his father. When he pinned her arms and yanked at his belt, he thought only of his Molucca girls and his God.

And in the middle of it all, as she screamed under him and he shouted back, Piet heard those voices in the wind.

PIET, PIET," someone was saying. He tried to open his eyes. "Wake up." A hand grabbed his arm and shook it. "Piet, she's gone. What did you do with her?"

It was Visser talking and Visser's hand shaking him, Piet realized as he opened his eyes and squinted against the sunlight. "Who's gone?" His lips were sore; for a moment he wondered how that had happened.

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"The Kaffir," Visser said, and then Piet remembered it had been Xohosa who had bitten his lip. Visser thrust an end of the liteCable in front of his eyes and shook it. "She's gone, Piet. Like she just chewed through it and walked away."

Not quite, Piet saw, for the end was laser-cut. He fingered the fused tip of the cable and stared at the small pile of khaki clothes a few meters away in the dirt.

"Did you cut her loose after . . . ," Visser began, but stopped short when Piet glanced his way.

He remembered everything, even the parts that made him close his eyes, but he didn't remember touching the cable. Certainly not firing up the laser and twisting the controls until the beam was sharp and hot. "What about the cable's key?" he asked. Visser had it in his hand already, and held up the small card.

"It was in the ruck.' He pointed to the small red square at its corner. "It thinks the cable's still locked." He tossed the cable key into the open ruck at his knees.

Piet stood and felt the muscles all through his back stretch and almost pop. It wasn't until then that he listened and didn't hear anyone else. He turned and looked, but they were alone.

"The Coloureds are gone, too," Visser said. Before Piet could ask, Visser said, "They took the *sowetos* with them. I've got the magazines, though." He hefted the ruck, and Piet heard the metal magazines clank together. "Maybe they went together."

"The bustergun? The snipe rifles?"

"All here. My laser, too."

"So we're alone, then," Piet said. The squared-off *kops* that loomed over their campsite leached danger now, not protection from the wind. With the Coloureds and their *sowetos* gone, with the Bantu gone, he and Visser were just twin pinpricks of light in the darkness. He knew that if he blinked, just blinked, they would be swallowed by the black land and its black ghosts.

But Piet also knew that he had to be here. The itch he'd felt the day they'd blown up the Bantu with the bustergun was back. His fear was dwarfed by the feeling that called him to the dead countryside.

"Let's go home," Visser said. There was none of the usual nastiness in his voice. No hate, either, which surprised Piet. After last night, he

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couldn't have blamed Visser for anything the boy thought.

Piet shook his head. The Bantu was out there somewhere, with someone carrying a laser. He remembered how her skin had felt for those short minutes the night before, how her face was not there against the darkness of the night and the black dirt, how beautiful she was. But he remembered best the words she'd shouted across the night, words that had seared his heart. He had to know if she told the truth.

Anyway, Father Niese was waiting for word. They'd found nothing, managed to lose their Coloureds. Father Niese wouldn't look kindly on what they'd done and not done. "Can't go back yet," Piet said to Visser. "We need to find the Bantu's ghosts, right?" He looked at his cousin and smiled. Visser didn't smile back.

"What if there're thousands of them out here somewhere?" Visser asked. He spoke a bit frantically. "They might be waiting for us. What if they just come at us? We could kill a hundred, and they'd step on us like that." To emphasize the words, he ground his boot in the dust.

Piet looked at Visser and knew there was nothing he could say to calm the boy. "Another two days from here, that's all," Piet said. "If we don't see anything in two days, we'll go home." He bent down and yanked his rucksack off the ground, picked up his snipe rifle and the bustergun, and hefted the ruck on a shoulder. "Is that good enough for you?"

Visser nodded after a bit. He was probably thinking of Father Niese now, too. "Not an hour past two days," the boy said. "I'm heading home alone," he said, and licked his lips nervously, "if you don't turn around then."

"Fair enough," Piet said. He waited while Visser slung his ruck, snipe, and laser, then kicked at the barely warm coals in the fire before they turned and headed due north in the barefoot tracks of the Bantu girl.

They came across the Coloureds' tracks midmorning, but the trail veered off to the northwest. They kept to the Bantu's tracks heading north. Around noon they lost her footprints for a bit, and Piet sweated out the next hour until Visser found them again.

The country changed slowly as they left the burned lands behind. The brush and short trees thickened, and the grasses grew higher. Visser said he was glad there wasn't the smell here like there'd been farther south. Piet

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said he wished the dust were deep here, too, so they could spot the Bantu's tracks more easily.

Visser worried aloud all day about shotmines, and though Piet believed the mines had been a fluke, they walked off the edges of paths whenever they could. They stumbled upon wildlife now and then, flushing out everything from springbok to a wild boar that glared at them until Piet raised his snipe rifle. But they saw no signs, not a one, of anyone besides the girl in front of them.

They made nearly twenty-five kilometers before they stopped in the lee of a small cliff. Visser threw his ruck on the ground and followed it with his rifle, then the laser. Piet was just as tired, but more careful with the bustergun. He didn't even bother to tell his cousin not to throw the laser like that — the boy was fast asleep as soon as he put his head on his ruck.

Piet built a fire, then leaned back against his own ruck, too tired to bother with food. He smoked to stay awake, knowing Visser would never be able to watch. He cradled the snipe rifle in his arms as if to keep it warm. The bustergun he leaned against the rock wall behind them. But though he smoked cigarette after cigarette, and hummed songs he remembered from his university years in Holland, he couldn't keep his eyes open long enough to stare into the darkness. He fell asleep, half-wondering if the Bantu was really out there, just beyond the firelight, and half-believing it was only her black skin that hid her from him.

The voices woke him. A gentle murmur, more or less, the sound washed against the cliff behind him and rebounded into the night. He clicked a magazine home in the snipe rifle, reached for the bustergun, and flicked it on, leaned around the still-burning fire, and nudged Visser. The boy stirred, and Piet kicked him.

"Get your nights," Piet said, digging in his own ruck at the same time. He pulled out the spectacles and slipped them on. The nights brightened everything. In a dim blue-green glow, Piet scanned the ground sloping to the stream a hundred meters away. Visser swore at something. When Piet turned his head, the firelight blossomed in his nights.

"Nothing's out there," Visser said. "Someone's out there, right?"

"You hear them, don't you?"

"Where are they?" Visser asked. He brought the laser up, and its beam

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cut a swath through Piet's vision. "Even a Kaffir shows up in these," he mumbled, sweeping the laser's beam from side to side.

"Turn it off," Piet hissed. "Use your rifle, you idiot." It took a minute or two for his nights to readjust to the darkness. Neither of them spoke, just listened to the voices rise and fall like an unsteady wind. Piet thought he could pick out individual voices — a child's, an old woman's keening — but he wasn't sure of anything anymore.

"There, over there," Visser yelled. The laser went on again and drew a line to the left, along the cliff. Before his nights overloaded and fogged again, Piet thought he saw a figure caught in the laser. "Piet!" Visser screamed. "Kill it!"

Reflexively, Piet hauled his snipe rifle to his shoulder and pulled its trigger. He couldn't see anything — his nights were still clouded — but he aimed the rifle where he'd remembered the silhouette, and let loose with half a magazine. Spent cartridges jangled off the rocks beside him. He yanked off the glasses and stared into the dark. The voices still whispered; he knew he could fire every round they had, and nothing would change.

But then Visser picked up the bustergun and pointed it downslope. Piet reached for his cousin, but before he could get a hand on the weapon, Visser had fired blindly. Piet followed the small red glow of the smart dart's exhaust. It sailed straight for the other side of the swale, and in a moment had disappeared in a brilliant flame and a hard-edged sound that drowned the voices. Rock chips rang off the cliff behind them.

"Yow!" Visser yelled. "You're dead, Kaffir!" Visser stood and screamed it at the fading light. In the silence between his shouts, Piet heard the voices resume. He gently pulled the bustergun from Visser's hands.

"There're more," he said quietly. Lots more, he thought. Visser was alternately shouting and silent, again with the laser aimed into the dark. Its light was invisible, but Piet could imagine it ranging from side to side. How could he see through his nights? Piet wondered, with the laser running like that.

But somehow Visser picked another one from the darkness, for he screamed at Piet again. "Right in front! There!" This time, though, Piet held the bustergun. It was a poor weapon for this sort of work anyway, he told himself. That's what the *sowetos* were supposed to be for.

Piet was sure there were thousands just beyond the firelight. He didn't have to see them painted in the laser to believe they were out there, If

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they were real, he couldn't kill them all; and if they were ghosts, as Xohosa had said, then even smart darts wouldn't do any good, would they?

"Do something," Visser yelled, but Piet stayed still. Visser yelled again, something unintelligible, and when Piet said nothing, the boy ran to the edge of the light and swung his laser up and over his head. At first Piet thought Visser was swinging at the night, but then he saw someone stagger into the firelight, and heard the sound of the laser's plastic stock meeting flesh.

The girl — for it was a girl — fell to the ground, her blonde hair smothering her face and lying out in front of her head. Visser, his hand on the laser, slammed it into her once more. She's white, Piet thought as he saw her skin, and as he opened his mouth to yell to Visser, the boy realized it, too, and tossed his smashed laser aside.

"Oh God," Visser whispered, and Piet heard it clearly. The voices were gone. "She's one of us; she's. . . ." It was as far as he got. Visser sat on the ground beside the broken girl and vomited into the dirt.

Piet went to the girl and felt at her throat, but there was no throbbing pulse. He pulled his hand away wet, and in the dim firelight, the blood was dark. Visser was through being sick, and he sobbed quietly. Piet put out his hand and touched his cousin's shoulder, but the boy jerked away.

Her clothes were worn, and her hands were thin. Piet guessed her face was, too, but didn't have the stomach to lift the hair out of the way to look. Gently, he went through her pockets, but found nothing more than several matches, a couple of coins, and a picture bent down the middle.

"Visser," he said, "let's go. Come on." He pulled at the boy, and this time, Visser didn't resist, but let himself be led back to the fire. Piet leaned him against the rock and put a cigarette in his hand. Then he went back to the girl and dragged her into the darkness. He covered her with some brush and left it at that. The jackals would take care of things when they'd left. Then he walked to where he'd aimed his snipe rifle, but all he found was the burned and fractured place in the rock where Visser's smart dart had hit. No tatters of cloth, nothing, even though he used his nights and searched carefully.

Visser was staring into the fire when he returned. The cigarette was still in the boy's hand. "What was she doing out here?" Visser asked softly. Piet stirred up the fire and watched theparks fly. He held the bustergun across his lap.

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"Don't know. Lost, maybe."

Visser laughed. The familiar edge came back into his voice. "Here? Four days from even our farm?" Piet couldn't find an answer. "Maybe she helped plant the shotmines. And cut that Bantu free. Could be her, couldn't it?"

His cousin was just trying to tell himself he'd done right, Piet knew. Piet made it easier on the boy and said yes, it could have been her.

Piet pulled out the girl's photograph, unfolded it, and angled it so he could see it in the firelight. It was an old picture, the colors almost faded. A little girl, white, stood in front of a stone wall. Flowers stood in pots on either side of her. Holding her hand was a Bantu woman dressed in what looked like a housekeeper's uniform. The little girl's nanny, he thought. The girl grinned and showed missing front teeth. The Bantu smiled, too, but not at the camera, for she was looking down at her charge. From the way she stood, so close to the little girl, and the way her face seemed to form so naturally into that smile, Piet knew the love had been genuine.

He wished now he had looked at the girl's face before he'd dragged her away. He figured the girl in the photo was a younger version of the girl in the bush, but it would have been better to be sure.

"We can go home now?" Visser said, interrupting Piet's thoughts. Piet nodded his head and held on more tightly to the bustergun. For some reason he couldn't bring himself to say yes.

Was it because of the Bantu Xohosa? Piet bit at his lower lip and willed first his shame, then her face, away. If not her, who, or what, made him stay?

He had no answer. Visser said nothing more, and eventually breathed deeply and regularly. Asleep, the boy looked peaceful enough. It took much longer — near dawn, really — before Piet could sleep, for every time he closed his eyes and drifted off, he woke to the sound of his dead father's voice in his head.

The morning was a brilliantly lit sample of blues and greens — skies so blue the few clouds looked like intruders, the small valley so green it almost overwhelmed the eyes. Piet shook the dreams of his father from his mind and sat up. He looked at Visser, who was still asleep, but let him be.

He stood up and saw the people. Three of them, down by the stream a hundred meters away. Two men, one woman. All Bantu. They were kneeling by the water, cupping it into their mouths.

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Piet looked to the bustergun still on the ground, but remembered the broken laser and left the weapon where it was. His snipe rifle leaned against the rock cliff, but he wouldn't need it. He knew that much.

As he walked down to the water, the three Bantu heard or saw him, and looked up. Strangely enough, they didn't run. The woman was Xohosa. The two men were dark, much darker than any Bantu.

"Baas," Xohosa said quietly as he stopped and looked at her across the narrow stream. She wore a loose-fitting shirt and bright red shorts that looked like they'd come from some footballer. Piet couldn't say the words he wanted her to hear. How could he?

The Bantu on her left shifted his weight, and the muzzle of a short survey laser appeared in his hand. Piet didn't know if it could be set to do damage, but he guessed it could. He guessed it was the laser that had cut Xohosa free.

"Are you going to kill me?" he asked her, not the man. She was the one in charge, not them. The girl paused, then shook her head.

"No, baas. You're like me now," she said, pointing to herself. "Like these two." She waded across the stream, the water up to her calves, and stood so close to him that he felt her chest rise and fall as she breathed. She looked

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up at him. "They've come a long way. Longer than you or I. All the way from Kenya. Do you know where that is?" He nodded. "They walked all this way because the dead ones called them. They heard voices they thought they knew, and had to come.

"I had to come back, too. My husband and child are there," she said, pointing south to the frontier. "Part of the dust you walked through. They called me back."

"What's happening?" Piet asked, and in his voice heard his father's in that last moment of videotape before the bombs fell and burned him into a Bantu.

"Who called you?" one of the Kenyans asked.

"My father," Piet said as if he'd always known, though it had been only the question that brought the answer. Still, he wondered if it had been more this girl than his dead father's ghost.

Piet looked over Xohosa's head and saw more people, a small crowd of them, coming down the valley. Not all black, either, for there were spots of white here and there that made the front ranks look like a cow's hide. More people trickled toward the stream from the ridge across the valley, and the group grew as it walked.

The other Kenyan, the one with the laser, spoke. "What happened was

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the final wrong. Not the worst. Not by far. Just the last."

"There're not enough of you," Piet said. He pointed to the survey laser. "You don't have any guns, not even a knife. What do you think we'll do to you?"

"You're like us now, baas," Xohosa said. "You'll walk across the black line with us and onto their farms, over their fields, into their cities. We will just walk until we reach the sea and the land is ours."

The crowd was nearing, and in the short time it had walked down the valley, it had grown into a compact mob. At least a thousand, Piet thought.

"For every one who called," the armed Kenyan said, "at least ten answer. From all over Africa. There are enough to last."

"Piet!" came a scream, and Piet turned toward the rock cliff and saw Visser standing with an arm outstretched and his eyes so wide in fear that they looked like holes into his skull. The boy grabbed up the bustergun and ran down the slope toward them.

Piet clutched at his cousin when the boy slammed into him, and tried to hold onto the bustergun, but Visser was mad with fright and too strong. He raised the bustergun — Piet could dimly hear the charge building —and pressed the trigger. The smart dart billowed out of the muzzle, tore through the two Kenyans, and exploded in a sheet of fire on the ridge behind their ripped bodies.

Visser swung away then, and aimed the bustergun blindly at the packed mass two hundred yards up the valley. Xohosa tried to claw her way past Piet to get to Visser, but Piet shoved her into the stream. He was the one who had to do this.

He picked up a hand-sized rock from the mud and walked the few meters to Visser's back. The boy struggled with the bustergun's magazine, as if it were jammed. "Uitgeskop," he was murmuring.

"God help me," Piet whispered, and swung the rock against the side of Visser's head. The boy went down, the bustergun tumbled into the stream, and blood was everywhere. He had to turn away from it, and Xohosa was there, her arms open and her neck ready for his tears.

She rubbed her hands on his back, whispering to him. The crowd swallowed them as a wave does two pebbles, and carried them along in its march to the sea.

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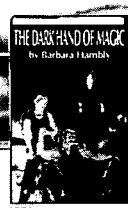

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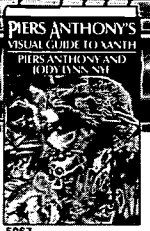

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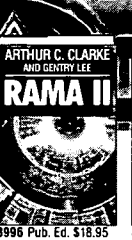

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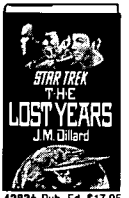

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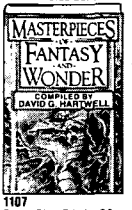

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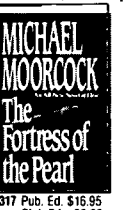

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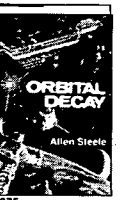

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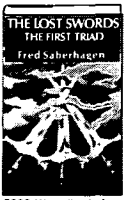

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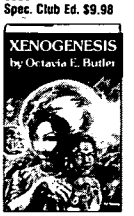

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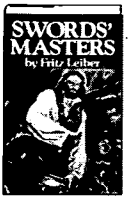

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